

JACK'S SECRET

BY
MRS LOVETT CAMERON



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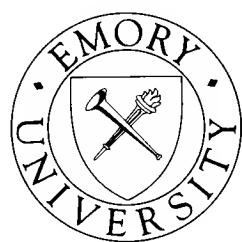
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J A C K'S S E C R E T.

JACK'S SECRET.

A Novel.

BY

MRS. LOVETT CAMERON,

AUTHOR OF

“IN A GRASS COUNTRY,” “A DEVOUT LOVER,”
“THIS WICKED WORLD,” “A SISTER’S SIN,” &c., &c.

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CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
I.—THE THREE MAIDS OF FAIRMEAD	1
II.—THE NAIAD	10
III.—BUTTER AND EGGS	20
IV.—A WONDERFUL LADY	29
V.—AN AFTERNOON VISIT	38
VI.—MADGE SHOWS SIGNS OF REBELLION	47
VII.—JACK BECOMES A HERO	55
VIII.—HEART BURNINGS	63
IX.—A WATER PARTY	74
X.—“ ALL IN THE GOLDEN EVENING ”	82
XI.—FAMILY COUNCILS	90
XII.—THE NIGHTINGALE’S SONG	98
XIII.—DAYS OF WAITING	103
XIV.—JACK’S RESOLVE	113
XV.—MARRIED IN HASTE	121
XVI.—HURRIED EVENTS	130
XVII.—THE TWO LETTERS	137
XVIII.—THE SHADOW OF THE TROUBLE	145
XIX.—JOHNNY	152

CHAP.		PAGE
XX.—THE BAD NEWS	• • •	160
XXI.—LANCE RECEIVES A SHOCK	• • •	168
XXII.—“ OFF WITH THE OLD LOVE ”.	•	178
XXIII.—A HOUSE OF MOURNING	• •	188
XXIV.—FRIENDLESS AND HOMELESS	• •	196
XXV.—AN EVENTFUL MEETING	• • •	204
XXVI.—NEWS FOR LANCE	• • •	212
XXVII.—THE LAST BLOW	• • •	219
XXVIII.—A HALF CONFIDENCE	• • •	228
XXIX.—LANCE HAS DOUBTS	• • •	234
XXX.—WHAT THE YELLOW KITTEN DID	•	243
XXXI.—A FRIEND IN NEED	• • •	250
XXXII.—SUSPICIONS	• • •	259
XXXIII.—THE PEARL NECKLACE	• • •	267
XXXIV.—OLD MISS DURHAM REPENTS	• •	277
XXXV.—MEMORIES AND REGRETS	• •	286
XXXVI.—TOGETHER AT LAST	• •	293

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CHAPTER I.

THE THREE MAIDS OF FAIRMEAD.

" She dwelt among the untrodden ways
Beside the Springs of Dove,
A maid whom there were none to praise,
And very few to love."

—WORDSWORTH.

" MAN is the cause of all the trouble in the world. We do not require the testimony, overwhelming as it is, of a mass of correspondence recently published in a daily paper, to convince us of the fact that woman's only chance of safety is to keep clear of him, her only hope of happiness a firm resolution to shape her life without him."

The speaker was a very old lady. She sat bolt upright upon her garden-chair, and as she gave utterance to the above sentiment, which, truth to say, she had thus solemnly enunciated many hundreds of times before, the heavy gold-rimmed glasses in her wrinkled right hand, swayed slowly up and down, as though to impress the words yet more firmly and emphatically upon the minds of her hearers.

There were three generations of women seated together upon the broad lawn in front of Fairmead Hall: Miss Durham the elder, who had spoken, Miss Margaret Durham, her niece, who heard her in pensive silence and with looks of gentle resignation, and Margaret the younger, her great-niece, commonly called Madge, who looked profoundly wearied, and somewhat mutinous into the bargain, as she listened.

Madge looked, in fact, as if she could have said a great deal if she had dared. But as nobody had ever yet dared to contradict old Miss Durham, after a brief pause she took up once more the thread of her parable.

" You have heard me tell you more than once, of the prophecy in our family which, strangely enough, my dears, is now apparently in course of being fulfilled. The old distich ran somewhat obscurely, and was not clearly understood in

my father's time, but now there can be no doubt of its meaning.

“ ‘ When Fairmead’s maids shall rule successive three,
Then Fairmead’s lands shall peace and plenty see.’

“ The three maids are to rule successively, that is quite evident. Three maids of the old family, of course. I call it a remarkable piece of prophecy, my dears, most remarkably carried out in ourselves,” and Miss Durham looked from one to the other of her nieces triumphantly.

Miss Margaret nodded her head and murmured : “ Yes, indeed ! ” with an air of deep conviction, for she had a profound respect for the traditions of her family, but in the depths of her heart, Madge said to herself that it was a very silly thing that she should be doomed to spinsterhood for the sole object of carrying out an ambiguous and ignorant prophecy.

“ I am sure,” continued Miss Durham, looking complacently from the old house, that lay bathed in the afternoon sunshine on one side of the lawn, back to the emerald green meadows sloping gently down towards the river, beyond the gardens, where sleek Alderney cows munched their placid way through the rich pasture, “ I am sure that I can honestly say that peace and plenty have slowly but steadily increased ever since, by my brother’s, your father’s death, Margaret, I became the mistress of Fairmead, and since a third Miss Durham has been, by the will of Providence, sent orphaned to the home of our fathers, it seems as though Heaven itself had pointed out to us the better path which the old prophecy long ago designed us to follow, and in so doing we shall avoid those dangers and misfortunes which unhappy women, who trust themselves in the hands of a man, are certain to incur.”

“ It is a pity that the world cannot go on without men altogether,” observed Madge, in so gentle a voice that the little undercurrent of sarcasm in the remark was wholly unobserved by her aunts.

“ You may say so, indeed, my dear,” cried the old lady heartily, whilst Aunt Margaret shook her head and sighed, “ but unluckily for the true interests of women, there are many positions in life which must perforce be filled by the creatures, although to my dying day I shall stoutly maintain that women would make as good doctors, school-masters, lawyers, even Members of Parliament, as any man amongst the lot. However, there are other considerations, no doubt——”

Here Wilson, the butler, bearing the silver tea-kettle, followed by James, with the tea-tiay, appearing suddenly upon the scene, necessarily cut short the old lady’s remarks,

and whatever she might have further revealed concerning the ultimate uses of the sterner sex, was promptly smothered in silence.

Whilst the two men-servants spread the snowy cloth upon the little garden-table, laid out the glittering Queen Anne silver service and the tiny, priceless cups and saucers of Japan ware, and disposed the tempting little dishes of home-made cakes and comfits into suitable positions, the three ladies sat looking on, each wrapped in a reverie of her own thoughts, but when the domestics had withdrawn and they were alone once more, Miss Durham observed complacently, as she took the tiny cup of steaming fragrance from her elder niece's hand :

" It is at any rate a comfort to me to know that, whatever other foolish and headstrong women, blind to their own best interests, may do, I and my two dear nieces have been wise enough to choose a single life, surrounded by every comfort of fortune and of freedom, and that no selfish and heartless male being will ever acquire the right to squander our worldly goods or to devastate the peaceful security of our hearts."

" No, indeed, dearest aunt," murmured Margaret the elder, who had been so long accustomed to imbibe these opinions from the lips of the family autocrat that she had ended by believing them to be her own. " No, indeed, we should be very ungrateful if we did not rejoice at our own immunity from the sad troubles which marriage invariably brings upon women. My own dear mother, for instance," and Miss Margaret lifted her handkerchief furtively to her eyes, for her mother had died of a heart complaint, and it was pretty well believed in the family that graceless Tom Durham, her handsome husband, had by his gallantries and excesses considerably hastened her end.

" Madge, too, will do well to remember the sad example of her own parents," remarked Miss Durham, gazing sternly at her great-niece.

" I think they were very happy," murmured Madge, deprecatingly, but the words were spoken so low that the old lady, who was somewhat hard of hearing, did not catch them.

" They died in squalor and misery, in a mean London lodging, dependent upon my charity for the bare necessities of existence," continued Miss Durham severely, " and this terrible state of things was brought about by no fault of your mother's, remember, but because my nephew wantonly squandered her fortune and his own, in unwarrantable and unsuccessful speculations."

Madge put down her empty tea-cup, and with no appearance of resentment or of ~~temper~~ ^{more} gently from the table

and walked quietly away across the lawn towards the meadows.

The two elder ladies sat and watched the graceful, slender, white-robed figure for a few minutes in silence, then with a shadow of actual apprehension upon her face, old Miss Durham asked quickly :

“ Is it possible that she rebels ? ”

“ No, no, dear aunt ! do not be uneasy. She is a good girl. Since that sad day when a little sobbing child of nine years old you took her away from that wretched lodging after my poor brother’s funeral, and brought her to live with us here, has she not always been obedient and teachable ? Madge will never run contrary to your wishes, I am sure, nor break away from your careful training. She is twenty-one, now, and must surely see for herself the wisdom of a life of maidenhood. Besides, she has seen no one—— ”

“ No ; after all, that is the chief thing. No man must be permitted to gain an ascendancy in her life. It was the course I pursued with you, Margaret, and see how successful it has been ! ”

Miss Margaret sighed. It was true, indeed that she had chosen the better part, but there were still memories, faint, yet seductive ; and there were times too, when at the very bottom of her soul she hankered just a very little still, after the abominable flesh-pots of the Egyptians !

Meanwhile Madge had reached the further side of the lawn, and was strolling down the gentle slope of the meadows towards the glittering river. It was one of those early days of delight, when spring is just merging into summer, when all the earth is teeming with life and gladness, and when the bare fact of existence seems a boon and a blessing for which to render praise.

The sky was blue as a turquoise, the trees still were decked in the tender greens of their youth, the meadows were bespangled with daisies and buttercups, and myriads of summer flowerets hung out their delicate colours upon the sun-bathed slopes of the hedgerows. The clumps of hawthorn-bushes along the riverside were white with fragrant blossom, and the birds sang in glad and noisy chorus amongst their branches, whilst ever and anon, the sad double note of the cuckoo broke in with harmonious undertone into the tuneful concert of nature.

Madge realised that it was good even to be alive upon such a day. Five minutes ago her eyes had filled with angry tears, and she had felt hopeless and full of rebellious thoughts, but now all that was hard and angry was exorcised away, and the youth within her sprang up full of vague, glad hopes and longings.

The tender breeze ruffled her white skirts as she walked

and stirred the loose tresses of her gold-brown hair, the azure skies mirrored themselves in her upturned eyes, and the wild rose in the briar-hedge seemed but a pale and colourless thing beside the delicate pinkness of her rounded cheek.

The Alderney cows lifted their heads as she passed, and, as though wonderstruck at the sight of this fair human flower, stood gazing gravely after her as she went by.

And then a curious thing came to pass, or seemed to her to come to pass. Every bird that sang and every flower that bloomed, each whiff of the scented breeze and each leaflet that fluttered over her head—all seemed to cry out together one thing, one thought, to her charmed ears.

“Youth is the time for love!” they cried. “Love is for youth, and youth is for love!” There was not a voice under heaven or upon the radiant world beneath, that did not take up the cry and echo it back from the four corners of the earth.

“Youth is the time for love—for love and life, for life and love!”

Only the cattle, looking after her with a mild, reproachful gaze, seemed to speak unutterable warnings out of their great, sad, brown eyes.

“They are all quite right,” cried Madge to herself, for, for lack of other companionship, this girl had developed a wonderful faculty for making friendships with the birds and flowers and animals of her daily life, and it was quite an extraordinary thing how they all knew how to talk to her in a language, which like a fairy maiden she had found out how to interpret. “They all are right—all but the cows, nasty things, they look so sad and solemn, they must have been listening to Aunt Durham! At twenty-one, how can I be expected to feel as they do?” she meant her aunts, not the cows. “Aunt Durham must be seventy, and Aunt Margaret fifty, but I am young—young, young, why should I not be wooed and won as well as others? Ah! I wonder—I wonder——”

Her voice died away with a little sigh.

She stood by this time upon the river bank between two snowy-laden may bushes; the wide stream glittering in the sunlight sped swiftly and silently at her feet. Beyond, on the further side of the river, rose a high, wood-covered hill-side, curving grandly to the west round the bend of the water, but sloping gently down towards the east into the watermeadows below. The trees on the wooded bank were still flecked with spring's tender colouring, deepening here and there into summer fulness, and the hillside mirrored itself back in the waters which laved its feet. It was a scene of greenest peace and beauty, such as England and the Thames alone can portray to us.

Madge Durham, upon the green verge of the river between

two snowy-laden hawthorn bushes, might have stood in that picture for the image of the Goddess of Summer herself. Not that she was wondrously or startlingly beautiful, for there was nothing marvellous about her at all, either in form or feature, only she was so fresh, and radiant, and unspoilt, such a happy type of a well-grown country maiden, healthy in mind and body, such as are still scattered by the score, thank God, all over the face of our dear old England.

Maidens who have clean hearts and simple aspirations, and who in no way resemble those flirting, dressing, admiration-loving girls, whom a long course of London seasons and London manners and customs, have transfigured into prematurely wide-awake women of the world.

Girls such as Madge Durham are cast in another mould. Evil does not exist for them, save in vague and intangible shadows, life is a beautiful dream, love a sacred poem but dimly understood, not a stepping stone to diamonds and handsome marriage settlements ; whereas strangest delusion of all ! duty seems to them to be the most important thing in the world, and pleasure a merely accidental circumstance in no way to be looked out for or unduly courted.

It will be a bad day for us all when that sweet old type of England's daughters dies out of the land, and becomes merged in the new fashioned product of our latter day civilization !

Madge Durham's mind and thoughts, as she stood upon the river brink, were as clear and as transparent as the running water into which she gazed.

The girl had been curiously brought up, and strange ideas had been inculcated into her ever since her childhood. She had been only a very little girl when she had lived with those unfortunate parents who had died in poverty. She knew, indeed, that they had been very poor, and sometimes very unhappy ; yet, in spite of all her aunt's warnings and teachings, she knew also that they had loved each other, and had believed in each other, and that, therefore, they had not been wholly wretched. It grieved her even now, by reason of those childish memories, to hear Miss Durham point the moral of her tales by covert abuse of her dead father. Perhaps—and by dint of being told so very often—Madge did in some measure believe it—perhaps men were, indeed, unsatisfactory creatures, and possibly her own father had been no exception to the general rule ; still as he was dead she often wished her aunt would leave his name and his memory in peace.

Old Miss Durham's tirades against the wickedness of men struck her as exaggerated, and her laudations of the beauties of a single life did not find a cordial echo in her secret heart. She did not intend to rebel, if Providence, as Aunt Durham

said, indeed intended her to be to her life's end the third maiden mistress of Fairmead Hall ; but it might well be that Heaven had other views concerning her, and Madge was too thoroughly sensible to believe it possible that women were all created to become old maids.

Her attitude, therefore, was one of indecision, of a negative and patient awaiting upon the issues of the future. She had been well educated, and carefully trained. The best of governesses, the most finished of finishing lessons had been bestowed upon her. She had read a great deal, and her mind had widened, and her wits become sharpened by what she had read.

Yet, at twenty-one, she was in many ways more girlish than many girls of seventeen. For instance, she had only been to one ball—that had been the solitary dissipation of her life, and it had taken place two years ago. A country neighbour had given the entertainment, and strong pressure had been put by many friends upon old Miss Durham to induce her to permit her great niece to be present.

With all her theories and fancies, Miss Durham was a gentlewoman, and a descendant of an old county family. It was no part of her programme to be at odds with her neighbours. Madge was allowed to go to the ball, and both the Miss Durhams accompanied her. She had been beautifully dressed for the occasion—dressed as befitting her station, and her position as the heiress of Fairmead, but her great-aunt had laid so many orders and injunctions upon her that it is to be doubted whether the poor child enjoyed herself much. She was not to dance more than once with any gentleman, the moment each dance was over she was to return to her aunts, she was to speak as little as possible to her partners, and she was on no account to go into the refreshment or supper room with any one of them ; if she were hungry or thirsty she was to tell her Aunt Margaret, who would accompany her into the adjoining rooms.

“And I am sure I hope no harm will come of it !” said old Miss Durham to Aunt Margaret as she settled herself down, gold rimmed glasses on nose, to do her duty in a commanding position in the ball-room—the duty of never taking her keen eyes off her young niece for the remainder of the evening.

No harm apparently did come of it. Madge who was obedient both by nature and by training, scrupulously and conscientiously carried out her great-aunt's orders, not only in the letter but in the spirit. She danced very prettily, looked very nice, and spoke very little—most of her partners thought her stupid. At an early hour, after a decorous little supper of cold chicken and lemonade, eaten under her Aunt Margaret's supervision, she was taken home in the

family chariot and put carefully and affectionately to bed, and told that she might lie in bed an hour longer the next morning. When she came down she kissed her aunts and thanked them for taking her to the ball, and assured them that she had enjoyed herself very much ; and then she went back to her practising and her reading of Macaulay's History of England, after breakfast, as if nothing unusual had happened.

Lady Gray's ball became a thing of the past, and Miss Durham congratulated herself heartily upon the wise precautionary measures which had effectually fenced off the possibility of evil results. But although that great event of her life was now two years ago, and had never been repeated since, there were trifling circumstances connected with it which Madge had never forgotten, and which she thought about very often even now.

She remembered perfectly, for instance, the face of one of her partners, a young fellow with brown eyes and dark hair, and a peculiarly pleasant smile, who had seemed surprised because, in answer to a common-place question, she had said that she had not only never been to London, but that she was never in the least likely to go there.

"Oh, but that is impossible, you know !" he had replied, laughingly. "Every girl goes up to London."

"I shall never do so," she had answered, gravely. "I shall never be allowed to leave my aunt's house."

"What, not even when you marry ?" had cried the young man, thoughtlessly, and then he had been still more surprised when, blushing very deeply at so light an allusion to so portentous a subject, his fair partner had replied very seriously :

"I am never to be allowed to marry."

The dance coming at this moment abruptly to an end, Miss Durham had immediately requested to be taken back to her aunts, and the young man had had no opportunity for receiving any enlightenment or explanation concerning this truly surprising statement.

Madge, however, had by no means forgotten the unbounded astonishment depicted in the pleasant brown eyes which had opened their widest upon her, at what was to her a very ordinary statement indeed.

She had had no idea what that brown-eyed young man's name had been. He had come up to her once more during the evening and had asked her to dance again with him, but acting under orders, Madge had politely refused to do so, and he had seemed quite hurt and had left her somewhat abruptly, when, on his further suggesting that he should take her into the supper room, she had very decidedly declined this offer as well.

After that, he had not spoken to her again. But she had very often thought of him since, indeed, she was thinking of him now, as she stood by the river side and watched the rippling waters.

Who was he? she wondered—how foolish she had been not to ask his name? She had never met him again and as he was evidently a stranger—a mere bird of passage in the country, nothing seemed less likely than that she should ever have done so. She had gathered, indeed, from his conversation that he was at Oxford, and that he had merely come over for the ball, in the capacity of a “dancing man,” to stay for one night at a neighbouring country house.

She could not tell why she had thought of him more than of any of her other partners—some of them had been better looking, some of them had been better dancers—but not one of them lingered in her memory so pertinaciously as did this nameless youth with the merry brown eyes and the pleasant smile.

There was a boathouse beyond the row of hawthorn bushes that fringed the meadow, and it was to the boathouse that presently Madge bent her footsteps. In some respects she enjoyed the most perfect liberty. Having been brought up to ride and to row, she was free as air to follow her own devices as to her indulgence in these out of door pursuits. She was perfectly at home either in the saddle or in a boat. Frequently she ordered her pony and rode forth alone for hours upon the downs or among the shady lanes, and almost daily she sculled her light skiff briskly up the broad river, or paddled her tiny canoe lazily amongst the shadowy back waters where the branches met over her head and white water lilies floated upon the almost streamless tide.

With a practised hand she untied the painter of her boat, jumped lightly in, and pushed her off from the narrow landing place into the stream, and as she shot swiftly out of the deep shadows of the boathouse into the sunshine without, she very nearly came into contact with an outrigger, manned by a gentleman in white flannels, who was evidently intent upon getting the utmost speed of which she was capable out of his narrow craft, and who came tearing up stream at lightning speed immediately in her course.

Madge, accustomed to all sorts of river complications, hallooed lustily :

“Look ahead, sir!” and pulled herself round towards the bank again.

The gentleman half turned his head, swerved quickly out of her way, shouted back a word of thanks, and in a couple of long swinging strokes was almost too far away from her for her to distinguish his face.

She could see, however, as she watched his swiftly retreat-

ing form that seemed almost on a level with the water over which the outrigger skimmed like a summer insect, that he was a fair complexioned young man of an unclassical cast of feature, and that his figure was considerably more inclined to corpulence than has ever been thought to be consistent in the hero of a romance.

She was also quite positive that she had never seen him before in her life.

He shot rapidly out of the landscape, round the curve of the river, and she saw him no more. Very soon, too, she entirely forgot that fat young man who had so narrowly escaped running her down. Her thoughts, in fact, went back by an easy transition of ideas, to that other man of whom she had been unprofitably dreaming before her reverie had been so brusquely interrupted.

Yet, all unknown to herself, Madge Durham's fate had turned at last, the final page of her quiet and uneventful existence had been closed for ever, and a new chapter wherein was destined to be written the whole trouble-tossed story of her life, had silently and relentlessly opened itself before her.

There was no one to warn her that that corpulent young gentleman in white flannels was destined to bear a part in her fortunes, yet so it was: and with the swift appearance and disappearance of the vanished outrigger, the first small link was forged in that long chain which was to lead her—whither?

CHAPTER II.

THE NAIAD.

“ We have been friends together
In sunshine and in shade,’

—CAROLINE NORTON.

“ JACK ! ”

No answer.

“ Jack, you lazy brute ! ”

“ What's up ? ” from within, in a very sleepy voice.

“ I do believe you are asleep ! do bustle up a bit and lend a hand with these dishes.”

“ Great Heavens, Lance, why in the name of fortune should you or I wash up dishes ! Where's that scoundrel, Antonio ? ”

“ Gone ashore. I've sent him to forage for eggs, those we have been getting the last few days from the village have been filth—mine had a live chick in it this morning, and I positively can't exist without fresh eggs for breakfast. Do come and help there's a good chap.”

Thus adjured, Jack Ludlow presently made his appear-

ance at the door of the saloon, and stood leaning there with his hands in his pockets, whilst he lazily watched the proceedings of a broad-backed young man with a florid complexion who was busily engaged in the homely occupation of washing up the dinner plates.

“What a pity it is, Lance, that nature has cursed you with so indomitable an amount of energy,” he observed presently, “together with so bountiful a measure of adipose deposit—you never can be still.”

“My good fellow, just consider what I should grow to, if I ever did keep still!” replied his friend, in no way offended at the allusion to his personal peculiarity. “As it is, by dint of hard work I keep myself down to decent size. I don’t mind telling you I have lost a stone since we have been down here! I walked up to the railway station yesterday whilst you were asleep and had myself weighed. A stone, all but half an ounce, I do assure you. I couldn’t keep it up if I didn’t take the exercise. Why I must have sculled eight miles up stream this afternoon, just as hard as ever I could pull. Oh—it’s a fine thing.”

“Whilst I was fishing for gudgeon in a backwater, off the punt. *Chacun a son gout*, Lance. I’d rather be excused from eight miles up stream before dinner, myself.”

The western sky was all aglow with the red light of the sunset, there was not a ripple upon the water, nor the whisper of a breeze in the air.

The *Naiad* lay at her moorings like a painted ship upon a painted picture.

She was a beautiful house-boat, newly built of polished pine, and furnished with every modern improvement without and within; from the tip of her symmetrical bows to the graceful curve of her stern, there was not a line about her that a captious critic could find a fault with. She was an ideal river residence. Her upper deck was gay with flowers in boxes and with scarlet awnings, and complete with lounging chairs and handy little tables, and her after-swim was softly carpeted with crimson cushions and turkish rugs. A whole fleet of small boats of various descriptions lay about her ready for use or amusement, and if you penetrated through the amber satin *portière* curtains into her saloon, there was not a single comfort or luxury from a book shelf stocked with well-chosen volumes up to a cottage piano which it could be left to the hearts of two decently disposed young gentlemen to desire.

For Jack Ludlow having remarked casually one day that he should like to possess a houseboat, it naturally followed that in a very short space of time the most perfect house-boat that could be found, had been purchased for him and fitted up for his use, regardless of expense. For this young man was

quite accustomed to have things arranged in this sumptuous fashion for him, and from the day of his birth he had seldom or ever, been denied a single desire upon which his fancy had been set.

It was an extraordinary thing indeed, that he was not at twenty-four the most insufferable young man within the British dominions, seeing that, as the only child of rich and doting parents, and the only nephew and heir of an uncle who held one of the oldest peerages in the land, he had been petted, and made much of, and indulged from his babyhood upwards.

As a matter of fact, he was not spoilt. Eton and Oxford, no less than an evenly balanced judgment and an utter freedom from pettiness of nature, had saved him from deterioration. He was neither conceited nor overbearing—neither bumptious nor even *blasé*! He took his good fortune very much as a matter of course, and was not unduly elated by it. He disliked toadies and flatterers, both male and female, and preferred for companions those who like himself, were manly and simple-hearted.

His greatest friend, Lancelot Parker, was a good example of his wisdom in this respect. Lancelot was the son of a country clergyman, of no sort of distinction; he had inherited a small fortune of a couple of hundred a year from his mother, and was quite as independent upon this modest income, as his rich friend upon his thousands. He was devotedly attached to Jack, but he loved him for himself, and thought no better of him because of his prosperity, nor yet because of the fact that he would one day become Lord Castlemere of Castle Regis.

Lance Parker was honest to a fault, and his entire rectitude of nature was one of the things which Jack appreciated and valued the most in him.

Their river life together, in the beautiful houseboat which Colonel Ludlow had given to his idolized son, began under the very happiest auspices, and under the serenest of skies. After mutually agreeing that they detested crowds, picnics, steam-lanche sand regattas—they caused the *Naiad* to be towed up-stream far beyond all these abominable things, into the peace and comparative solitude of the waters of the upper Thames. Here, by one of those coincidences which life presents so often, and which can never be satisfactorily accounted for, they selected a spot for the mooring of their ship, exactly a mile and a quarter above the meadows, studded with hawthorn bushes, which sloped down to the river brim in front of Fairmead Hall. "We will stop here six weeks," said Jack to his friend as they sat contentedly smoking their post-prandial pipe together on the first evening of their arrival at this carefully selected resting place,

"I hope to goodness you haven't got any letters of introduction to the natives!" growled Lance roughly.

"Not I! have we not come here to be at peace?" replied his friend; "all the same, I have an impression that once, at some period of my existence I came over from Oxford to a ball somewhere in this part of the world. Were you with me, Lance?"

"I? Great Heavens, Jack! when did I ever lose my presence of mind to the extent of going to a ball? If these people are here still, then good-bye to comfort!"

"Don't be alarmed, my dear fellow—they died!—the host who entertained me I mean—I hardly knew him: he lies buried probably under the shade of yonder church-spire."

"And a good job too!" replied Lance unfeelingly. "Look here Jack—let us understand one another. If you want to go philandering after women and society, I can't of course prevent your doing so; but the very first time you try and induce *me* to go to a dance, or a tennis party, or an archery meeting, or a woman-show of any sort or kind, I pack up my traps and go back to town!"

"All right, old chap!" laughed Jack gaily "I don't think I shall trouble you this time!"

And so the two young men had settled down into a life of absolute quiet and laziness; the ideal river life, which in fine weather is the most charming existence that can be conceived. They fished, they smoked, they read; they lay on their backs, with pipes in their mouths in the boat in the shade, they discussed and argued over every topic under the sun, or else they "took it out of themselves" physically (Lance chiefly) by hard "spins," in the outrigger, or double sculling in the skiff up stream for the sake of exercise—at other times they punted lazily about in the punt, or fished for barbel in the rushing stream of the Weir. Antonio, Jack's Italian factotum, cooked, cleaned, and otherwise slaved for them—not a living being intruded upon their solitude—nor did an invitation note of any sort or kind invade the sylvan silence where the *Naiad* lay at peace.

And all this had now lasted for one whole week.

When Lance had finished washing the plates, and clattering them noisily down one upon the other, he rose to his feet, and remarked quietly as he wiped his wet freckled hands upon a glass cloth:

"Now whilst you—my fine handsome young lady-killer—have been fishing ineffectually for barbel which you did not catch, *I*, the rough unpolished boor, have had an adventure!"

"An adventure, Lance! you sly dog! I thought you were bursting over with something mysterious to-night; what is it? Out with it!"

"Aha! wouldn't you like to know! I've a great mind to keep it a secret."

Mr. Ludlow seized his friend playfully by the scruff of the neck and shook him.

"You dare to keep a secret from me, Lance! as if you ever could! There's a woman in this, Lance! You dog! you Lothario! you Don Juan! you destroyer of female hearts!" all of which opprobrious epithets seem to afford Mr. Parker quite an exaggerated amount of delight and entertainment; for if there was one thing on the face of the earth which he was well known to detest, it was a woman, and the only foe before which he had ever turned his back and fled, was the flutter of a feminine skirt.

His fat rubicund face became convulsed with laughter, and all the river echoes awoke into life along the banks, at the sound of his jovial merriment.

"Am I not right—was it not a woman, Lance?"

"Well, yes it was," admitted Lance mysteriously, as soon as Jack had left off shaking him and he found himself able to speak.

"What did you talk to her about?"

"Nothing."

"Then what did she talk to you about?"

"Nothing."

"Then—what the devil happened?"

"That's just the devil of it. Nothing happened!"

"Good Heavens! and you call that an adventure?"

"If you will just have a little patience, and not ask so many spasmodic questions—in fact," seating himself upon a thick velvet cushion behind him and fanning himself slowly with the glass cloth—"in fact, if you can manage for a few minutes to listen to me and to hold your tongue, I will endeavour to tell you about it."

Jack composed himself upon the cushions opposite, in an attitude of respectful attention.

After an instant's pause, during which Lance pulled his pipe out of his pocket, filled it, and lit it with much deliberation, he began between two tentative puffs—

"To begin—with—she—she was the most lovely—creature I ever saw in my life!"

"Did you see her then?"

"Certainly. I had my eye-glass up."

"What was she like?"

"I couldn't really tell you."

"Upon my honour, Lance," cried Jack laughing, "I begin to think you've been dreaming! A woman you cannot describe, who did nothing—who said nothing—!"

"Ah! there I was not strictly correct. She did say something, I remember."

"Were you introduced to her?"

"No, I was on the point of introducing myself—in fact, I very nearly ran her down."

"Oh, it was on the river then! I fancied you had landed at some house."

"No, it was on the river—rather more than a mile from here, and the first thing I heard was a wild yell. It didn't sound romantic, and it wasn't in the least musical—it was just a hallo—"Look ahead, sir!" or "Where the something are you coming to?" or something of that description. I can't exactly remember the words, but that was the gist of them—well then, naturally I turned my head, and I saw a lovely creature in white, just across my course with her stroke side exactly in a line for my bow. She was sculling by herself in a nice little light boat—she looked like one of Timms' build, I should say—"

"What! the lady?"

"No, the boat. She got rather cleverly out of my way—handy with her sculls evidently, and of course I pulled out of hers—"

"And of course you stopped and apologized, and enquired if you had done any damage, and contrived to find out where she lived, and who she was—?"

"Of course I did nothing of the sort. I went straight on."

"Oh! you confounded idiot! with never a word!"

"I just said 'Beg pardon, mum' but I don't think she heard me. I couldn't possibly stop, Jack, I'd got into my swing after the lock, and I was timing myself home by the minute."

"Well, all I can say is that I never in the whole course of my life heard a more melancholy history of wasted and thrown-away opportunities!"

"Why," rather ruefully, "what would you have done in my place?"

"Done? Why everything! I should have upset her to begin with."

"Good Heavens, Jack, how monstrous! why, I had no grudge against the poor girl. Why should I want to drown her?"

"Oh, not drown her, of course—only give her a ducking, just for the pleasure of fishing her out."

"You would have given *yourself* a ducking for that?"

"Certainly. Just imagine her gratitude, her loving devotion to the man who had saved her life!"

"Oh! I say—I never thought of that! Do you think it would have made her love me?"

"No doubt. Women are very tender-hearted creatures. You might have carried her home insensible—been introduced to her sorrowing mother, who would have gone down

on her knees to thank and bless you. They would have entreated you to stay and share their simple evening meal—pressed every sort of attention and hospitality upon you ; when you went away the mother would have strained you to her ample breast, exclaiming, ' You are the saviour of my child—all that I have is yours ! ' whilst the lovely daughter would very likely have raised your hand furtively, and with maiden blushes, to her rosy lips, whispering, ' Tell me how I can ever thank you ! ' Oh, there is no knowing what a good time you might have had if only you had shown a little presence of mind, Lance ! She would certainly have adored you."

" You think so ? Well, on the whole, I think I am glad I didn't upset her—it might have been—well—rather embarrassing," answered Mr. Parker slowly and with a grave thoughtfulness which utterly delighted his lively friend, who noticed, furthermore, with secret glee, that Lance continued for some moments attentively to contemplate the hirsute and freckled back of his own exceedingly unpoetical fist, as though he were trying to picture to himself what would have been his sensations had the heroine of Jack's little romance bestowed a kiss upon it.

" Instead of all which," continued Jack, inwardly chuckling, " you don't even remember what the girl was like ! "

" I beg your pardon," said Lance, looking up quickly ; " I should know her again anywhere."

But as he either could not, or would not describe her, Jack turned laughingly into the saloon, lit up the lamps, and sat down to the piano.

Presently his full, rich, baritone voice, upon which no pains had been spared to make it as cultivated as it was naturally harmonious, broke out into a somewhat pathetic little negro song, with a refrain in a minor key, which somehow seemed to harmonise with the stillness of the darkening June evening—with the deep shadows across the quiet water—with the stars that came out one by one in the heavens—the twinkling village lights far away over the meadows on the earth—and presently too with the silver crescent of the rising moon, as she stole from behind the shoulder of the wooded hill to mirror her fair image shyly and tremblingly in the bosom of old Father Thames.

Jack sang on from one thing to another, snatches of popular melodies, dreamy Italian serenades, scraps out of comic operas—once even he broke out into a few bars of a Magnificat by Mozart. His voice was of that adaptive quality which is always pleasant to listen to in any capacity—and all the time Lance sat outside in the starlight, smoking his pipe and thinking—thinking in a fashion in which he had never thought before.

Presently came the soft splash of oars—the dinghy with Antonio returning, unsuccessful, from his raid upon the hen-yards of the neighbourhood.

Lance got up and shook himself, in order to pitch into him.

“Only three eggs, Antonio ! and you’ve been three hours on shore ! Where have you been, you rascal ? You’ve been at the ‘Green Dragon,’ Antonio, or else you’ve been courting ! and only three eggs to show for it !”

Ah, but there were no more eggs to be had—the Signor must not be so harsh. Antonio had, by his own account, scoured the country side—some had promised, some had even sworn they would send more to-morrow—“The hens in this accursed country cannot lay eggs in June *apparamente* ! Ah, what an accursed country !”

“Only at F’cremeede ’All, zey do tell zey ’ave eggs—at ze vaarm—” said Antonio in conclusion.

“Fair—what Hall ?—where’s that ? How are we to attack people at Halls to sell us eggs ?”

“Ah—it is at ze *Va-arm*, Signor—ze Padrona at ze va-arm she do zell ze eggs—it is out zere,” waving his arm wildly first east and then west, with a beautiful confusion of topographical ideas.

“Well, well, we must try and find the place to-morrow—tie the dinghy up, Antonio, and get to bed.”

“Time to turn in, Lance !” cried Jack, shutting up the piano and coming to the door of the saloon.

“Not got any eggs, Antonio ? Well, never mind, don’t jaw any more—go to bed. Are you going to sit dreaming out there all night, Lance ? How unsociable you are ! I believe you are in love.”

For once Lance was not ready with an answer. He followed his friend into the saloon without a word. If Jack only knew—he thought with a grim smile to himself—the things he had been thinking about all this long while, whilst he himself had been singing ! Good Heavens ! would Jack ever let him hear the last of it ?

A swinging lamp, with a rose-tinted glass shade, hung by chains from the ceiling—a luxurious couch was on one side, a natty little writing-table, daintily fitted-up, on the other—a couple of deep arm-chairs, and on the walls, as pretty a selected collection of water-colour sketches as could be imagined in so small a place. Every detail of the cosy little river sitting-room had been ordered and arranged by Lady Mary Ludlow herself. Her own fingers had nailed up the satin portière curtains and hung the white and gold framed pictures in their places. With loving eyes she had seen to every detail, both of comfort and of ornament, so that her darling son should have the very best that love as well as

money could procure for him. She had chosen his piano, his house and table-linen, his glass and china—there was not, in fact, so much as a kitchen-saucepan or a japanned pie-dish in the whole of the toy establishment to which she had not given a careful and supervising eye.

For, as Lady Mary told her intimate friends, Jack was so good a son as well as so creditable a one, that it was the greatest joy of her heart to do everything on earth to make him happy.

“I like him to have his own way in everything,” this doting mother used frequently to say, “and if he prefers that good, honest, ugly creature, Lancelot Parker to any other more brilliant companion whom we might consider better suited to his position in life, why I, for one, am not going to raise any objection to it !”

Lady Mary was quite sure that on the whole length of the Thames that summer, there would not be another house-boat fitted up so completely and so perfectly as was the *Naiad*.

And no doubt she was perfectly right.

As the two young men stood for a few moments, chatting together under the light of the swinging-lamp, it would have been impossible for any stranger, seeing them thus side by side, not to be struck with the very great contrast between them, which was no less remarkable in their personal appearance, than in their characters and dispositions.

Lancelot Parker was short, and, as has before been mentioned, decidedly stout. His shoulders were broad, and his arms muscular and strong, his face was certainly plain—he had lanky hair of the colour of bleached hay, and pale eyes of no particular colour at all, in one of which he was accustomed to wear an eye-glass ; his features, moreover, were nondescript in shape, so that he was wont to say of himself that he had no profile. Nevertheless, Lance had a thoroughly pleasant face—the kind of face which, from its genuine honesty and frankness is generally more attractive to men than to women, and which made his friends instinctively feel about the man that he was, above all else, trustworthy, and as true as steel.

Jack Ludlow was as complete a contrast to his friend as could well be imagined. He was tall and slight, with a figure which betokened more of grace and refinement than of bodily strength. His features, especially the brows and nose, were well defined and remarkably good, but although the curves of an almost femininely beautiful mouth were superficially strengthened by a most masculine auburn moustache, yet beneath it the lower lip and the pointed chin fell away into something that was at variance with the rest of the face—a something that denoted vacillation of purpose,

oddly mingled with a certain reserve of nature. This defect, however, was so little to be noticed by reason of the well-grown moustache and the exceedingly pleasant smile which disclosed a row of white and even teeth, that not one person in a hundred ever observed the small flaw in what was undoubtedly a good-looking face, nor felt inclined to cavil at Lady Mary Ludlow's openly-expressed conviction that her son was a very handsome fellow.

As to his character—let this history of his life speak for itself. Jack Ludlow is as yet untried, and neither trouble nor perplexity has hitherto shaded his path. His conscience is clean, and his life has been upright. Whatever errors and mistakes he is destined to commit in the future, it is as well to understand that at least he is at heart, what he is by birth, a gentleman, *pur sang*.

He little knew—(we never do mercifully know these things)—that his own good-night words to his friend on this very night were the first tiny steps towards the greatest error and the greatest mistake of his life.

“Lance,” he said, “I will punt you down stream to-morrow and we will go and forage for eggs ourselves. Antonio is a duffer. We may come across this ‘Va-arm’ of his and be able to barter coin for hen-produce, or we may on the other hand meet with your beautiful young lady in the boat, whom I shall do my best to run down immediately—either alternative holds out a tempting prospect of variety in the even tenour of our unchequered existence. Good-night, old fellow. I shall be up at six for a swim.”

And then he turned into his cabin and was soon sound asleep in his berth, with the photographs of Colonel and Lady Mary Ludlow hanging above his head, and smiling placidly down upon the picturesque form of their good-looking son.

But Lancelot Parker tossed about for a long time upon his tumbled pillows, and the Goddess of Sleep refused to be wooed to his restless couch—he was wide awake long after the moon had gone to bed and the dark curtain of night was folded closely about the silent world, quite wide awake and thinking -- of all people in the world — about Madge Durham!

CHAPTER III.

BUTTER AND EGGS.

But all things else about her drawn,
 From Maytime and the cheerful dawn.
 A creature not too bright or good
 For human nature's daily food ;
 For transient sorrows, simple wiles
 Praise, blame, love, ~~kisses~~, tears and smiles.

—WORDSWORTH.

MADGE DURHAM was up betimes on a fine June morning. Hers was not at all the kind of disposition which finds any pleasure in lying in bed behind darkened windows through the loveliest hours of a summer day.

When the early dews lay thick upon the lawn, Madge loved to be there, to scatter the sparkling jewels with her dancing footsteps—when the birds were singing their morning carols Madge would have felt herself to be a laggard had she not been at hand to listen. She was out and about, hours before her aunts came down to breakfast in the long gloomy dining-room into which the morning sunshine never penetrated ; and was wont to come in with rosy cheeks and sparkling eyes and hungry as all the hunters upon earth to partake of that somewhat melancholy meal.

So, on the morning after her encounter with a fat young man in an outrigger, whom she had already forgotten, Madge came in through the open window out of the sunshine, redolent of fresh air and new mown hay and new blown roses and cowslips, and Heaven only knows, how many other divine smells besides.

“Good-morning dear Aunts !” tossing her wide-brimmed hat to one side, and bestowing a passing salute on each of the maiden brows held up towards her. “I *am* late am I not ? but oh, there was such a lovely squirrel in the pine wood ! I could not help following him. He sat up in front of me in the path, and I crept up quite close till I could see his wicked little black eyes winking at me as much as to say, ‘Come on, thou mortal maiden and I will lead thee such a dance !’ And so he did, for suddenly away he sprang up the fir tree behind him and along a branch on to the next tree, and there he stopped winking and blinking at me again, just enticing me on, the wretch ! He was like one of those Wood Gnomes in the German fairy story-books of my child-

hood, Aunt Margaret. I believe this one *was* a gnome really and truly, for he cocked his little head on one side and peered so oddly at me out of his malicious little eyes——”

“Bless the child, how she does run on!” interrupted old Miss Durham, “and all about a tiresome squirrel! I suppose you had been down to the farm, Madge?”

“Yes, Aunt Durham, and oh, by the way I was to tell you from Gates that there is another litter of pigs born, and that he says will be the last of them. And he is going to turn out Mayflower’s calf into the paddock behind the orchard. And there is the sweetest little new brood of fluffy ducklings you ever saw! seven of them, just like little balls of saffron-coloured cotton wool—and—oh, yes! there was something else I was to say besides—Mrs. Gates says there are eighteen eggs this morning, the most we have had yet, and she says she supposes she may sell them if we don’t want them all in the house.”

“Indeed, she may do nothing of the sort!” exclaimed Miss Durham, who looked after every detail of this kind with scrupulous exactitude. “Cook wants them, every one—did you not remember that Mr. and Mrs. Baskerville are coming to dinner to-night, Madge?”

“I am so sorry, aunt, I forgot it. I will go after breakfast down to the farm and tell her to send them to the house. She is not likely to have sold them yet.”

But after breakfast Madge had a great many things to see after. There were her canary birds to clean, her flowers to be watered, her pony in the stables to be visited and fed with apples and lumps of sugar, and that entailed a long chat with Dawson the old coachman, and an inspection of an interesting young mother up in the hayloft, who most proudly exhibited her first family, three fat and totally blind white and tan fox terrier pups, to her mistress.

So that altogether it was quite twelve o’clock when Madge recollected that she had promised to go down to the farm again, to caution Mrs. Gates against selling any of the eggs.

By twelve o’clock it was hot, and Madge had been running about a good deal. A pleasant little drift down stream in her canoe on the shady side of the river would, she thought be infinitely pleasanter than a walk across the sunny fields.

The Home farm, as it was somewhat grandiosely called by old Miss Durham, lay half-a-mile from the Hall, and the cosy, red-brick house, inhabited by the farmer and his wife, with its gables and its wealth of creepers was quite close to the river and just a stone’s throw above the Lock.

When, after a most leisurely voyage down stream in her little cockleshell craft, a voyage that was conducted on the simple principle of drifting down with the current, with an occasional lazy dip of the paddle into the water, Madge

arrived at her destination, she was somewhat surprised to find a very smart and apparently brand new punt, furnished with luxurious crimson cushions, upon one of which a small fox terrier kept watchful guard, tied up opposite the farm house.

Nobody seemed about, so jumping nimbly on to shore—an operation by no means so easy to perform with security, by the way, as it is to write about—Madge walked up the gay little garden and knocked at the door. It was opened by the farmer's second daughter, a girl of about thirteen.

"Mother's in the dairy, Miss," she replied in answer to her young lady's question, "there's some gentlemen called to buy butter and eggs."

"Good gracious! that is the very thing I've come about!" cried Madge excitedly, "don't you come Emmy, I can find her."

And filled only with the appalling picture of old Miss Durham's wrath should the precious eggs be gone, she flew round the corner of the house across the yard to the dairy. She had forgotten all about the smart punt.

The dairy door stood ajar. Madge could just see the red-cheeked farmer's wife, in her lilac-spotted print gown and white apron, standing within the darkened coolness of the tiled walls; and the spotless red-brick floor with the great brown pans of cream-surfaced milk on the shelves all round her, discoursing volubly to someone invisible, upon the merits of a golden slab of butter which she held between two flat wooden pats.

Madge pushed open the door. "You are on no account to sell any eggs to-day, Mrs. Gates!" she cried impetuously and then stopped suddenly short in utter shame and confusion.

Two gentlemen in white flannels stood within. A short, fat young man, and a tall slight young man. Off went two straw hats in a twinkling, whilst four eyes, two of washy blue and two of clear golden brown, were fixed upon her in amazement tempered very considerably with delighted admiration.

For certain, no such vision of blooming youth and beauty had been revealed to the two stranded young men since the day that the *Naiad* had been brought to anchor in the waters of the Thames, nor had it entered into the mind of either of them to conceive a more charming picture than that presented thus unexpectedly to their astonished gaze. Madge in her cool, white cotton dress and flower-decked straw hat, her pretty face covered with confusion, and her blue eyes opened wide with surprise, was in truth a very delightful interruption to Mrs. Gates' harangue.

True, she seemed to have dropped from the skies into the

homely scene, and Jack for one could not conceive how a delicate young lady in a fine white, embroidered dress, with a diamond ring on her taper finger and a little enamelled and jewelled toy of a watch hanging to her waist-belt, could possibly have any natural place in Mrs. Gates' farmyard and dairy, but Lance had recognised her at once, and, although he was ruddy by nature, he became promptly fifty times redder than nature had made him, by reason of the strength and intensity of his emotion upon recognising the heroine of the previous day's adventure.

There was a moment of embarrassed silence into which Mrs. Gates most opportunely burst.

"Law, Miss, then whatever am I to do? I've just been and sold fourteen of them eggs to these gentlemen, as wanted new laid particular. You should have mentioned it this morning, miss, if they was to go up to the 'All."

Here Madge became conscious that the short fat man carried a most unprosaic market-basket upon his arm within which, carefully packed betwixt a dead fowl and a bundle of asparagus, lay the disputed eggs in a little heap of fragile and delicate whiteness.

Nothing could exceed poor Lance Parker's distress of mind when he perceived the young lady's eyes light upon that terrible basket and observed a small shy smile creep stealthily about her lips.

"I felt like a greengrocer's or a poult erer's boy, and like a thief, into the bargain," he said afterwards to Jack.

In his agony he held out the basket with both hands towards the young lady.

"Of course, we should not think of keeping the eggs. Pray take them back, if you want them. We could not think of depriving you," and with his eyeglass in his eye and his fat face puckered into lines of actual wretchedness, he looked so irresistibly funny that, the comic side of the subject suddenly breaking in upon her, Madge laughed outright.

"Oh! possession is nine points of the law!" she cried merrily. "I don't see how I can make you give them up now."

"And I don't feel in the very least inclined to give them up!" here said the tall young man briskly.

Madge turned her eyes and her smiling face quickly from the fat young man, whom she had at once recognised as the individual in the outrigger, who had nearly run into her yesterday, to his companion, and as she did so, a strange thrill ran through her. The clear brown eyes, the auburn moustache, the pleasant smile, all were familiar to her, all had haunted her vaguely in dreams, both by night and by day, ever since the last time she had seen them—he was the unforgotten partner of her ball two years ago.

She gave a little eager start, her lips parted as though to

speak, and her eyes flashed forth a greeting as they met his fully, then she stepped hastily back, her lips closed, her colour rose, her eyes fell. He did not remember her! Ah, what a pitiful mistake she had nearly made. She who recollects so well, and he who had so utterly forgotten!

How very, very glad she was that she had seen it in time. How frightful otherwise might have been her shame and humiliation! She was fortunate indeed to have escaped so terrible a blunder.

Yet she felt a little cold and sick, and there was a shadow of angry vexation at her heart against him.

Jack could not imagine why the bright face became suddenly so clouded and so quiet, nor why her voice took so calm and subdued a ring as she answered him.

"If you have bought the eggs you have certainly a right to keep them."

"But if you want them yourself," cried Lance impetuously, "how could we possibly deprive you of them?" and again he pushed forward the offensive basket that was laden with the spoils.

Madge laughed anew. "Oh, it is not I who want them. Why, what should I do with fourteen eggs? It is my aunt —she sent me with a message. But it seems, Mrs. Gates," turning to the farmer's wife, "it seems that I came too late. As you have sold the eggs to these gentlemen, they must, of course, keep them, and I shall tell Aunt Durham that you had already parted with them."

Mrs. Gates, whose dairy and poultry produce were the pride of her heart, and whose chiefest joy in life was the consciousness of a good balance sheet when she rendered up her quarter's accounts to her ladies, beamed with delight at this satisfactory decision. The golden butter was then quickly transferred to the fat young man's basket, and there being nothing to remain any longer in the dairy for, Madge went out of it with a slight bow, intended to be a farewell to the purchasers.

But when she got outside, her way was, of course, back to the river, and, as their way lay in the same direction, it followed not unnaturally that they all three found themselves side by side walking across the farm garden.

Lance Parker was next to her and Jack Ludlow beyond him. As Lance was short, Jack was able to speak and look at the young lady across the top of his head, but he could not help noticing that though she smiled and spoke quite freely to his friend, yet there was a restraint and reserve in her manner to himself.

"I am evidently out of it," said Jack to himself. "She likes Lance the best. Lucky dog! Fancy old Lance making a conquest, and such a pretty conquest, too!"

"So that is your punt?" said Madge, as they stood together by the river's edge. "How nice she looks with her red cushions, and what a dear doggie. He is rather like one of ours."

"Look here," exclaimed Jack suddenly, "won't you let us have the pleasure of punting you back, if you are going up stream, that is to say? We can tow your canoe up behind us."

Madge drew back with a little alarm.

"Oh! I don't think I ought to do that," she said doubtfully, yet eyeing the punt and her cushioned stern somewhat longingly.

"Oh, yes; pray do," cried Lance eagerly. "It's hot work paddling up stream in the middle of the day. We might just as well take you back to—wherever you want to go," not feeling quite sure as to where that might be.

"I should like it very much, certainly," admitted Madge hesitatingly. She was secretly longing to go.

"My friend's persuasive tongue succeeds, where mine has failed," cried Jack gaily, jumping into the punt, and straightway busying himself with detaching the canoe from her moorings and tying her up to the stern of the punt. "We consider the thing settled then."

They were both determined to take her with them, and Madge, though she was vaguely uncomfortable, could not quite find any reasonable excuse to put forward against so simple an arrangement.

No doubt young men were all, as Aunt Durham had often told her, nothing better than ravening wolves. No doubt they were dangerous and wicked creatures, false, and black hearted, and cruel; bent upon the utter ruin of any woman who was fool enough to trust to them. Madge was sure that must be true of the major portion of mankind, since Aunt Durham must know better than she did. Perhaps, too these two specimens of a hated sex were no better than their fellows at heart, but anyhow they seemed very gentle and pleasant outwardly, and they had a nice way of talking and a merry, boyish fashion of laughing. It surely could not do her any great harm, she thought, just to go that short half-mile with them, in their nice punt, up as far as the boathouse.

Jack, with a wonderful self-abnegation, which he often marvelled at in after days, was determined, since Lance was apparently the favourite, not to spoil his sport. He therefore left it to Mr. Parker to hand the lady in and to establish her upon the cushions, where she made a very charming picture in her white frock and shady hat. Then Lance flung himself in a lover like attitude at her feet, whilst Jack took up the pole and addressed himself solely to business.

"I think," said Madge timidly, as they pushed off from

the bank, "that it would make things more comfortable if you would tell me your names."

"By all means, we ought to have introduced ourselves before. I am Lancelot Parker, and my friend is John Ludlow, and might I ask——?"

"Who I am? I am Madge Durham. Everybody round here knows me. I live with my aunts at Fairmead."

"What, the big white house that stands back from the river? And oh, that of course was Fairmead Farm, so that accounts——"

"For my flying in to forbid Mrs. Gates from selling you the eggs!" laughed Madge. "You see my aunt keeps the farm entirely in her own hands. She sells the produce, of course, but not an egg, nor a pound of butter can be sold without her sanction. Poor Mrs. Gates has a rough time of it sometimes, I can tell you! And now tell me, Mr. Parker, where you and Mr. Ludlow are living?"

And then Lance, squatting at her feet with the market basket closely cherished in his arms, proceeded to tell her all about the *Naiad*. What a beautiful house-boat she was, and what a capital situation she was in, and how much he and his friend enjoyed the freedom and peace of this particular part of the river.

Lance was in a fool's paradise. Young ladies were not in the habit of wasting much of their attention upon him, and he had hitherto been strangely insensible to female blandishments. But this young lady seemed so different to all the others. She was kind and pleasant to him, she listened attentively to what he said, and her voice and smile were so sweet, that poor Lance, whose heart had been predisposed in her favour, now fell rapidly over head and ears in love with her.

Her blue eyes seemed to him to be full of a special and personal interest in him, and she did not appear to see or to care that he was fat and ugly and by no means a romantic-looking person.

Meanwhile, Jack plied his punt-pole in silence and took no notice of the couple upon the cushions. Yet ever and anon when he was well away at the bows, Madge looked at him furtively and stealthily, and thought how gracefully the tall figure in spotless flannels stood out against the green background of the trees and water, how well and easily he punted, how handsome and brave he looked altogether.

"He hasn't changed a bit," thought Madge, "he is only a little broader shouldered and his moustache has grown bigger. I should have known him anywhere, and yet he has not the faintest idea that he has ever seen me before!"

Once, when she was thinking about him in this fashion Jack looked up suddenly, with that mesmeric attraction

which causes us to know when anyone is watching us, and their eyes met, but she turned away hers so quickly that he fancied she was annoyed and took care not to offend again.

“Jack,” called out Lance suddenly in the midst of an earnest conversation of which Jack could not hear a word. “Jack, Miss Durham says she has never in her life been inside a house-boat. I tell her she must come and see the *Naïad*, mustn’t she?”

“Certainly,” replied Jack, who had got his pole into a stiff bit of clay, and appeared to be entirely engrossed in extracting it. “Why,” after a little pause, “why won’t Miss Durham come on now? We will take her up in no time, and bring her back again.”

“Oh, no! I couldn’t think of going now,” cried Madge. “And besides—it is very kind of you, but I really don’t think I could come at all. You see I should have to tell my aunt, and she might not like me to go.”

“Oh, that is easily settled,” cried Lance; “bring your aunt too, we shall be delighted to see her.”

Madge said that there were two of them.

“Then bring them both,” urged the infatuated Mr. Parker eagerly.

Madge laughed and explained that her great aunt, Miss Durham, was over seventy and was totally impracticable; her only hope, she told Lance, lay in Aunt Margaret, but then Aunt Margaret was dreadfully nervous on the river, she doubted very much if she would trust herself in a boat.

“You might ask her,” pleaded Lance, and then whilst she shook her head doubtfully, Jack, too, thinking to be hospitable, stopped for a moment in his labours to say:

“Do ask her, Miss Durham, we shall be so glad to see you both.”

And that simple remark weighed more with Madge than all poor Lance’s entreaties.

In the end, she promised that if she could persuade Aunt Margaret to accompany her, she would come to five o’clock tea on the *Naïad* the next day.

Then as the punt was nearing the Fairmead boathouse with its little landing stage, Madge looked up suddenly and beheld Aunt Margaret standing on the bank regarding her with looks of blank dismay and amazement.

The young men saw her too, and hastened to bring their passenger to land.

Madge was quite equal to the occasion.

“These two gentlemen have been kind enough to bring me up from the farm, Aunt Margaret. Allow me to introduce my aunt, Miss Margaret Durham—Mr. Parker, Mr. Ludlow.”

The young men stood up hatless in the punt, and Jack

said very politely, whilst his friend carefully assisted Madge to land :

"We are in hopes, Miss Durham, that you will bring your niece to five o'clock tea to our house-boat to-morrow. She is only about a mile from here up stream. It will give us very great pleasure if you will honour us with a visit and we will endeavour to give you a good cup of tea."

"I am sure you are very kind, sir," replied Aunt Margaret stiffly, but she neither said she would, nor she wouldn't, and with that ambiguous answer, they were forced to be content, for Miss Margaret left no time for further conversation, but tucked Madge's arm safely under her own and, with a little bow to the unknown marauders, carried her off quickly down the path towards the house.

"Madge, what is the meaning of this? Who are these men?"

"I don't know who they are, aunt, although they told me their names. I met them at the farm where, unluckily, Mrs. Gates had just sold them all the eggs. I could not take them back again as they had paid for them, could I?"

"Certainly not. But tell me all that happened, Madge."

Madge, unconscious of any wrong in what had taken place, readily told her aunt all her little story. And when Miss Margaret discovered that the two gentlemen were strangers, temporarily stationed on the river in a house-boat, mere birds of passage, in fact, who were certain to take themselves off to fresh scenes in a few days, when also she heard Madge laughingly describe one of them as the "ugly little fat man with the good-natured face," and declare that the "other one" was sulkily or stupid, for that he scarcely talked at all, she became reassured, and her worst terrors were appeased.

Then Madge, who could always get over Aunt Margaret, who by nature was a soft and gentle soul, begged, and prayed, and coaxed her to come with her to-morrow to visit this wonderful house-boat. Aunt Margaret admitted that she, too, would like to see the interior of one of those mysterious water-buildings: "For," she said, "I have never been able to understand how they do their cooking and keep their stores properly in those little places, it would be interesting to find out."

"Very interesting!" cried Madge pressing her advantage.

"I am only afraid you may upset me, Madge; you know how frightened I am of being drowned."

"Oh, dear, dearest, Aunt Margaret, I promise faithfully I won't do that. I will take you up so carefully and steadily you won't feel frightened a bit. Do—do say you will go!"

"If I were quite sure it wouldn't be wrong, Madge."

"Well, let us tell Aunt Durham, and then we can go with

a clear conscience," for the word " wrong " in the Fairmead dictionary was simply translated in the minds of her nieces into doing what old Miss Durham had forbidden.

" Oh, my dear, I should not *think* of telling Aunt Durham ! " cried Miss Margaret hastily. " You know, my love, what she thinks about men, and young men in particular, and if we told her, she would be quite certain to disapprove strongly, and then we could not go. No, the only way I can see, Madge dear, is that I should for once take the responsibility on my own shoulders. I am old enough I think to judge for you for once, and as these gentlemen have very properly invited me, and as it is for once in a way, and we shall probably *never, never* see either of them again, for they are certain not to stay in this neighbourhood more than a few days (gentlemen, you see, Madge, like gay places like Maidenhead and Marlow, not quiet dull parts of the river like this), why, I think all things considered, if we keep it a little secret between our two selves, and don't tell Aunt Durham about it, there could not be much harm in our going, and I confess I should like to see how they manage about cooking their food and airing their linen and sweeping out their rooms, for it has been always a puzzle to me how they do it."

It must therefore be admitted that Miss Margaret herself was not altogether free from blame in these early beginnings, and that some portion of the trouble which followed in after days for sweet Madge Durham must, with strict justice and propriety, be laid at her door.

But neither, on the other hand, was Madge altogether candid in the matter, for whether by accident or by design, she omitted to mention that she had met that brown-eyed young man two years ago at the ball, and that she had never ceased to cherish his memory in her foolish heart from that day to this.

CHAPTER IV.

A WONDERFUL LADY.

" Her voice was ever
Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman. "

—SHAKESPEARE (*King Lear*).

A VERY long way north of the pleasant valleys of the Thames where the *Naiad* lay at peace upon the bosom of the waters, a lady and two gentlemen, whose thoughts and conversation were more frequently occupied with that same *Naiad* than her inhabitants were at all aware of, were seated at luncheon in a pleasant room overlooking a green and finely-timbered park.

The gentlemen were both elderly, upright, straight-limbed and grey-haired, and the likeness between them was so

strong that no one could have taken them for anything else but brothers.

They were, in fact, Lord Castlemere and his only brother Colonel the Honble. John Ludlow. The lady was Lady Mary Ludlow, Jack's mother, and the subject of discussion between them all three was Jack himself.

Lord Castlemere had driven over from Castle Regis to Northerly Park, a small property which his brother had purchased a few years ago, and which was situated about eight miles to the north of the family estates. Betwixt the two—the Naboth Vineyard of Lord Castlemere's longings—lay some hundreds of broad acres of fat pasture land, of rich cornfields and cosy farmsteads belonging to Sir Herbert Verinder. The position of affairs will be better understood if it be at once stated that Sir Herbert Verinder possessed an only daughter, and that it was the favourite scheme of all concerned in the matter to unite this young lady to Jack Ludlow.

The project had already been discussed freely and unreservedly in all its bearings by Lord Castlemere, by Colonel Ludlow and his wife, and by Sir Herbert. Jack himself had not been kept in total ignorance of the plan, and although he had as yet neither assented nor demurred, it was generally understood by his elders that he had no objections to urge against Sir Herbert's heiress. The only person, in fact, who was absolutely in the dark concerning the pending negotiations was Agnes Verinder herself, who had hitherto been too much engrossed in the distractions of her London seasons to interest herself keenly in anything less entralling than the choice of her numerous new dresses.

The second post had been brought in just before lunch, and by Lady Mary's plate lay an open letter from her son. Lady Mary was a very pretty little lady still, although she was five-and-forty, and a great many tiny wrinkles had stolen into her once smooth and transparent complexion ; but she still had dark and luxuriant hair, a very sweet smile and gold-brown eyes, that were every whit as clear and bright as her boy's.

She had had money as well as beauty, and it had been said that Lord Castlemere as well as his brother had desired to marry her, and that it was for her fair sake and for that of her son, that he had remained unmarried.

Be that as it may, neither rivalry nor jealousy between the brothers had had sufficient power to separate them, and they had continued through life the best of friends ; whilst Lord Castlemere's devotion to his pretty sister-in-law had never overstepped the limits of chivalrous and fraternal affection.

As they all grew older together, the passions of heart-

burnings of early years had become tempered down into calm and generous forbearance, and a new link had sprung up which had quickened into life the warmest family affection between them. That link, of course, was Jack.

In Jack were centred so many hopes and ambitions, that it would have been wonderful indeed if any ordinary young man had been in his own person able to fulfil them all. Each of the three had different theories concerning the management and training of this one young man. Lord Castlemere, for instance, was convinced that to employ peremptory measures was the only method to reduce a high-spirited young fellow to the will of his elders. The boy should be kindly but firmly told what was expected of him, and instant obedience to his superiors exacted. His father, on the contrary, was for letting him alone and leaving fate or chance to be the ultimate guide of his actions ; whilst Lady Mary, cleverer perhaps than either of them, was no less determined to guide her son than was his uncle, but was convinced that by *finesse* and some amount of judicious "make believe," the ends desired could be more easily obtained than by more direct and straightforward measures.

In whatever else these three persons differed, there was at any rate one subject upon which they all agreed, and they were entirely determined to co-operate together in order to bring about their object.

It was almost essential that Jack should marry early, and it seemed highly desirable that he should marry Miss Verinder.

The preliminaries of this alliance had been all arranged and determined so long ago that there seemed nothing more left to do, but to bring the matter to a climax.

It was this last step, which oddly enough, began to appear so difficult to accomplish.

Miss Verinder was with her aunt in London. Jack was on the Thames in his new house-boat. The task of bringing the two young people together did not seem to be such an easy matter as might be imagined. Agnes had written to her father that she could not possibly tear herself away from London till August, and that her aunt had promised to take her then to Goodwood.

Jack wrote to say that life on the *Naiad* was perfection, and that he should certainly not lay her up till the end of the summer, although to please his uncle he would run home for the 1st of September for the beginning of the shooting.

"Yes, and meanwhile some other fellow will propose to Agnes and carry her off from under his nose !" exclaimed Lord Castlemere irritably. "Why on earth, John, don't you order the boy up to Town and tell him to settle it with her at once ? That's what you ought to do."

"My dear Charles, I don't think that would answer at all. Jack is a high-spirited boy, anything like coercion would set his back up at once."

"Set his back up, indeed! A son ought to obey his father. I should like to know what our father would have said to you or me."

"Oh, things have altered since our day! You can't force a young man of four-and-twenty into marriage now-a-days. It's better to leave it to come about naturally. When he comes home for the partridges, Agnes will be back too; Verinder will see to that—the young people will be thrown together. You see it will be much simpler to let things be than to force them on, which might only make him throw the whole thing up. What do you say, Mary?"

"I agree with you in a great measure, John," said Lady Mary, speaking for the first time in a voice which was remarkably gentle and sweet-toned. "But I think, my dear, we must not let things slide quite so much as you suggest. As your brother very properly remarks, Agnes' affections might become engaged elsewhere, and there is no reason why, with a little cleverness, we should not manage to help matters on in the right path even at the present moment. It is not probable that Jack will fall in love with Agnes until he is more thrown in her society than he has been hitherto. In September it must be our business to bring things to an issue; but meanwhile, there is no reason why he should be allowed to fade out of her memory, and as he is certainly in no way averse to the match, I think this will be very easy to arrange."

She took up her son's letter. "Will you let me read to you a portion of Jack's letter?" The two brothers composed themselves into an attitude of attention, and Lady Mary, turning over the sheet of paper, selected a passage which she proceeded to read aloud :

"All right, dear mother, about Miss V. I am sure I have no objection to such a handsome young lady, and as you say my uncle thinks it my duty to marry, and it will please you and the governor, I am not at all inclined to run counter to your wishes. But you see I don't know Agnes Verinder at all well, as I have hardly seen her since she has grown up, and, moreover, she might not fancy me, although you, my dear old lady, will perhaps hardly be able to conceive such an aberration of intellect on the part of a well brought up young woman! So that altogether, don't you think we had better wait a bit, till we can see more of each other? There's no hurry, surely, and a year hence will suit me much better."

"I tell you!" here cried Lord Castlemere excitedly, bringing his fist down heavily upon the table, "I must have

that boy married and settled down by Christmas. Why, great heavens, Mary, I am getting an old man ! Is it unnatural, do you think, that I should desire to see my heir with boys of his own to come after me ? It isn't as if you and John had had other sons, but with this one young fellow only, between the title and extinction, we can't afford to let the grass grow under our feet. He has run loose long enough ; if you give him much more tether he will be throwing himself away in some fashion, marrying some governess, or penniless nobody behind our backs."

"Oh, I don't think Jack would do that," said Lady Mary, with a little offence.

"Well, well I hope not. But you never can tell what young men will do in these days of liberty, when, as John tells me, they are not expected to obey their parents as we were made to do, and it would be a thousand pities to let a girl like Miss Verinder slip, a girl we have known all her life and who is suitable to him in every way, with the Deep-Deane property dove-tailing in, and plenty of ready money to keep it up into the bargain. No, you really must let me speak my mind, and I must insist, if I have any authority at all in the matter, upon his being married at Christmas."

"I do not think even that will be impossible, Charles," said Lady Mary soothingly. "Do you suppose that I intend to sit still and do nothing between now and September ?"

"My lady has some plot in her head !" said her husband, smiling at her.

"Of course I have—trust a woman for plots, my dear !"

"What is it, Mary ?" asked her brother-in-law, and he too smiled. It was wonderful the trust these two men had in that frail-looking little lady.

"I intend my son to give a picnic. If it succeeds, there is no reason why he should not give a series of picnics, in fact. Fashionable London ladies like nothing so well as water-parties given by nice young men. Mrs. Verinder and Agnes will of course be invited. It will be a very smart water-party, everything will be splendidly done—I shall see to that. I am not sure that I shall not go up to Town myself in order to convey the guests safely down from Paddington in a saloon carriage. Young people become very intimate at picnics, they are given to wanderings about in couples after lunch—in boats or upon the shores amongst the woods ; there are flirtations, there are love-makings — nothing can lead to happier results——"

"Aha ! my lady, you recollect your own young days, I see !" cried her husband merrily ; whilst Lord Castlemere remarked with appreciative gravity, "Upon my word, Mary, you are a woman of grand resources ! there never was anyone like you !"

So it was decreed that Jack should give a picnic on board the *Naiad*, and that most clever little lady, his mother, did not fail, when writing to him upon the subject, to put the matter to him in a light which made it quite impossible that he should refuse to accede to her proposal. Bearing in mind Jack's horror of crowds and shows, his avoidance of fashionable ladies, and his reluctance to partake in anything of the nature of season festivities, Lady Mary made the matter a personal concession to herself. She very carefully worded her letter in this fashion :

"The week after next I have to go up to Town for a few days ; write to me by return and tell me which day I may come down and spend a nice long day with you. I am thinking that it would be very pleasant if the weather is fine and make the journey less lonely for me, if I were to bring down two or three of our mutual friends and a hamper of food from Fortnum and Masons to help out your resources. Mr. and Mrs. Selwyn are in Town ; they were so kind to you at Nice last winter, I think it would be a little attention if I asked them to come down with me, and Mrs. George Verinder and Agnes, I know would like to come, and you might suggest a couple of men to ask. We should not be more than eight or ten people in all, and really it would be a delightful little trip for me and I should enjoy it amazingly etc., etc."

Jack fell into the trap. He adored his mother, as all good sons ought to do. He perceived that it would give her real pleasure to bring her friends down for a day on the river, and conceived it to be only graceful and affectionate on his part to agree to her little suggestion. Moreover, "the week after next" appears to us often to be at an immeasurable distance ! —one has time to breathe, to turn round, to back out of a thing, if needs be, between to-day and the week after next !

"Here's an awful ordeal in store for us, Lance, my boy !" he had cried out merrily to his friend ; "my mother and several other smart London ladies wish to come down and spend the day with us."

"Oh, Lord ! I shall hook it," cried Lance in dismay.

"You will do nothing of the sort. I want you most particularly to stay and see me through it."

"Very well, then, I'll stay," amended Lance meekly, with a groan. "When is it coming off?"

"Not till the week after next."

"Oh, come, that's a comfort ! Anything may happen between this and then."

Upon which Jack sat down and scribbled a few lines, to say he had rather of course have his dear old lady, as he

called her, all to himself ; but if it pleased her, she was free to bring as many of her friends down as she liked, supplemented by as many hampers of good things as she thought desirable. And then he added in a postscript :

“ Of course, I shall be glad to see Miss Verinder and her aunt—pray tell her so from me.”

The sentence was perfectly genuine. He really was rather anxious to see her. It would of course commit him to nothing at all if she came, but since it seemed possible that she might eventually become his wife, it could only be right and proper that he should begin to improve his acquaintance with her.

So Antonio took this letter on shore in the dinghy, and dropped it into the village post office ; it was the very morning of the day on which Jack punted his friend down to Fairmead Farm to buy eggs and butter, and when the punt came slowly back up stream, with sweet Madge Durham reclining upon her crimson cushions, that letter was already well on its way to Northerly Park.

Perhaps, had he delayed his answer for a single day, he might have written more—or he might have written considerably less.

The issues of life hang upon hours. One hour sooner, or one hour later, is often sufficient to determine our destiny. Nor can we ever afterwards ascertain precisely why the one carried us forward with such irrevocable haste, or the other held us back with such unsuspected yet iron handed tardiness !

Up at Northerly, Jack’s ready answer was received with much satisfaction, and many were the congratulations upon her wit and wisdom which Lady Mary received. She ordered her ponies forthwith, and drove down to Deep-Deane, Sir Herbert Verinder’s place in the valley, to make sure of him as an ally for the occasion.

Sir Herbert was a placid old gentleman of literary tastes and mild manners. He chiefly desired to be let alone with the old books in his library, and he was most grateful to anybody who would settle the turbulent questions of life out of hand for him, in order that he might be saved all trouble concerning them, and be left in peace.

Nevertheless, he was not altogether insensible to the solid advantages of this world’s good things, and Heaven having laid the trial of an only daughter upon him, he was by no means unwilling that she should marry the only son of well-to-do parents, who would eventually become Lord Castlemere of Castle Regis into the bargain.

It would save him a great deal of trouble in the future if she did—just as it saved him a great deal of trouble in the present that his brother’s widow, Mrs. George Verinder, had

undertaken to pilot his child through the turmoil of presentation at Court, State balls, and all other festivities, private and public, supposed to be essential to the well-being of a young lady of good family and position. If Mrs. George had not taken the trouble off his hands, it might have been that the poor man would have had to leave his study and his beloved books and take her up to London himself. He could not be sufficiently thankful that that visitation of fate had been spared him.

Having married late in life a lady who had died contrary to all his expectations, leaving a young daughter on his hands, he might, much against his inclination, have been forced into a second marriage, had not Mrs. George come to his assistance. He was very grateful to Mrs. George.

In the same manner he was equally grateful to Lady Mary Ludlow, who had settled about Agnes' marriage so comfortably and agreeably to all parties, without giving him any trouble or disturbance in the matter.

He was rather fond of Lady Mary too. She had been attached to his wife and had watched by her bedside with affectionate devotion during her last illness, and in his quiet way Sir Herbert had been sensible of it, and had never forgotten it.

When he saw her pony-carriage come smartly up the avenue towards the house, he paid her a compliment which was very unusual to him—he rose from his beloved books, and went out into the hall to meet her at the front door.

"We want you to help us, dear Sir Herbert," said Lady Mary when she found herself alone with him in the library.

"Anything I can do for you, Lady Mary—" he answered politely, pushing forward an arm-chair for her.

"I want you to write to Mrs. George Verinder," she said, and then she unfolded the plan of the picnic to him, of which the bringing together of the young people was to be the very essence.

"You must write to Mrs. George privately and tell her the date I have fixed—the week after next, on Thursday—and tell her that whatever other engagements she may have made for Agnes must be set aside. Of course I shall send her a proper invitation—but make her understand that she *must* accept it."

"I will do my best—"

"Ah! but you must do more! You must lay your paternal commands upon your daughter, Sir Herbert. Do you know that it is really getting very important. Castlemere insists upon the marriage taking place at Christmas."

"Is not that rather hasty?" said Sir Herbert, to whose slow and dilatory nature all prompt actions were instinctively repugnant.

“Not at all. What is there to wait for? Agnes has had two London seasons, and quite as much dissipation as can be good for any young woman. And Jack will be five-and-twenty next birthday. It is high time for them both to settle down—besides Castlemere is naturally impatient to see the succession settled. If we let things go on much longer, Agnes will be falling in love with somebody else! And then where should we be?”

“Oh, I am certain there is nothing of the sort. Mrs. George would have written to me.”

“Well, I hope there isn’t. Anyhow it is time that these young lovers should be thrown together, and this water-party is to serve as a beginning, so write to your sister-in-law at once, dear Sir Herbert, that there may be no mistake about it.”

“I will write this evening, Lady Mary.”

“You will do nothing of the sort, my dear fellow!” cried Lady Mary, who knew her man. “You will sit down and write now—this very moment—and I will wait whilst you write and post the letter with my own hands on the way back. Why, I know perfectly well what would happen if I left you. You would postpone it till to-morrow, then you would think it over for twenty-four hours more, and after all perhaps you would think better of it and not do it at all. Oh! I know you!”

Playfully she pushed him into a chair by his writing-table, laid a sheet of paper upon the open blotting-case before him, dipped his pen into the ink and thrust it into his hands.

“Now write!” said she, “whilst I read the paper.”

He submitted laughingly.

“You are the most energetic and impetuous woman I ever knew!”

“Of course I am. Where would you all be if I wasn’t energetic and impetuous, I should like to know! Why, my dear Sir Herbert, the world would come to a standstill if we were all like you!”

“And if all were like Lady Mary Ludlow,” he retorted, smiling, “what would become of the virtues of prudence and foresight?”

But he wrote the letter all the same. Lady Mary carried all before her with most people. Few could resist the eager rush of the torrent of her will—nor the brisk decision of her onslaught. Whilst others debated and doubted, Lady Mary’s quick mind had already determined upon action, and whilst her adversaries were making themselves ready to oppose her, she had fought her battle and won her victory! It is the secret of a good deal of the success of this world.

Sir Herbert Verinder was a very long time writing his letter, as might have been expected of him; and whilst he

wrote it Lady Mary read the leading articles in the "Morning Post," which did not interest her in the very least, with exemplary patience.

When he had finished, she gave herself infinite credit that she refrained from requesting to read what he had written, and she took the letter from his hand without a comment.

He followed her out into the hall and helped her himself into her low phaeton, and when she drove off down the avenue shaking her whip as an adieu and waving his own letter triumphantly back at him, he said to himself as he turned back into his solitary house what many other men had said of her also :

"A wonderful woman that ! There is nothing she cannot do !"

And then he added to himself with a certain grim amusement, as he went back to his interrupted studies of Plutarch's Lives :

"She can even make me do something in a hurry !"

CHAPTER V.

AN AFTERNOON VISIT.

"I have marked
A thousand blushing apparitions
To start into her face, a thousand innocent shames
In angel whiteness beat away those blushes."

—*Much Ado About Nothing.*

"HEADS they come—tails they don't !" said Jack Ludlow, tossing a shilling, at a quarter to five on the following afternoon.

Mr. Parker was so distressed at this irreverent display of levity, that he betook himself to the upper deck and began scanning the horizon anxiously through opera glasses.

Here, under a shelter of the red and white awning, a little five o'clock tea table had been spread. Blue and white cups and saucers, feathery bread and butter which Jack the neat-handed had himself spread and cut, and a pile of crimson strawberries temptingly arranged in juxtaposition to a bowl of cream.

How Lance had toiled and slaved for the best part of the morning to procure these luxuries, it boots not here to relate.

As the fateful hour approached, terrible doubts began to assail the minds of the two young men.

After all these elaborate preparations, could it be possible that the invited guests would not come !

"It's tails, Lance !" cried Jack from below. "They won't come."

"Shut up, you idiot—I see them !" cried Lance, hastily coming backwards down the companion steps.

Mr. Parker was very red, and looked somewhat confused—he began nervously arranging the furniture in the saloon.

Jack laughed at him lazily. “I never saw you so excited before, Lance! I believe you are in love!”

Not a suspicion of the nearness of his words to the truth entered into Jack’s mind. It struck him as very comic that “old Lance” should display so much anxiety about a young lady and her maiden aunt—he, who hated all women and was wont to take an infinite amount of trouble in order to avoid them! But that Lance had any serious feeling in the matter was the very last thing that came into his head.

Neither was Mr. Ludlow at all able to analyze his own feelings at this time. He said to himself that he was much amused at his friend’s flirtation—yet that surely could not account for a certain little soreness which lay at the bottom of his heart, that she should have preferred Lance to himself—nor yet for the small warning note of conscience within which distinctly informed him that perhaps if the invited guests failed to put in an appearance it might possibly be a very good thing for himself; a vague impression which found vent, curiously enough, in a muttered anathema upon a totally different subject.

“Hang that picnic! I wish I’d never written that letter yesterday!”

The boat, sculled by Madge in a dark blue flannel skirt and pretty pink striped shirt, and with a round sailor hat crowning her brown hair, in which costume she looked if possible even more fresh and charming than in the white raiment of yesterday, approached the *Naiad* very slowly and by a strange and circuitous course. Her singular and erratic movements indeed excited the surprise of the two young men until they suddenly became alive to the causes thereof.

Aunt Margaret was steering; and in the semi-lucid intervals between intermittent squeaks and gasps of terror and alarm, she tugged vehemently first at one string and then at the other. The progress of the *Fairy* up stream had consequently been slow and laborious.

“Keep to the right, Aunt Margaret—the right line—you are pulling the left.”

“Oh, my dear, I *did* pull the right, and it did no good at all! There, is that better? Oh! now we are going straight into the bank, Madge! What shall I do? *which* string shall I pull?” trying both frantically. “Oh, I am sure we shall be upset!”

Madge back-watered vehemently, and pulled the boat’s head round, and with superhuman efforts got her clear of the clump of overhanging willows into which she was rapidly plunging her nose.

"Now keep straight, dear aunt, pull the left very gently—not too hard, so"—Madge bent forward to settle her stretcher, and the skiff swayed slightly from side to side.

"Oh ! Oh ! Oh !" shrieked Aunt Margaret. "It's going to upset I know ! we shall be drowned ! I wish I had never consented to come—it serves me right for going without Aunt Durham's leave ! And oh ! my dear—there goes a whistle ! It is a steam launch—I know it is ! If it bears down upon us we shall be lost !" And flinging the steering lines wildly away Aunt Margaret hid her face in her hands in order apparently to avoid the spectacle of her approaching doom.

"Why, aunt," cried Madge laughing, "it is right away the other side of the lock ! We shall be at the house-boat long before it comes through. See there is the *Naiad* at last. Now if you will sit still and leave the lines alone, I can pull up easily now by myself," and so after a voyage of much difficulty and confusion Madge did at length bring up her craft, and shipped her sculls alongside of the graceful *Naiad*, without any further tackings or backings.

It was a dreadful business getting Aunt Margaret safely out of the *Fairy* on board the house-boat, as for some time nothing would induce her to stand up, and it was only when Lance got into the boat and assisted her to her feet whilst Jack seized her securely by both wrists, Antonio bending over to steady the *Fairy* at the bows the while—that with great pains and difficulty she was safely hauled out, uttering sundry little cries of terror during the operation, which subsided into a sigh of thankfulness when she found her feet firmly planted at last upon the deck. Once there the good lady forgot all her troubles and began to enjoy herself exceedingly.

By a not unnatural mistake both ladies took Mr. Parker for the owner and proprietor of the floating domicile. Lance was three years older than his friend, and looked even more than his age. It was his custom, too, to give the orders to Antonio, and to take the active part of all arrangements in the little establishment. All this he did in order to save trouble to Jack, whose indolence made him dislike the exertion of managing things for himself.

Thus it came about that it was Lance Parker who assisted the ladies to climb on to the upper deck, who poured out their tea and helped them to strawberries and cream, and performed all the little fussing attentions of a host to his guests.

So that when the pleasant little meal was over, it was to Mr. Parker that Aunt Margaret addressed herself upon the desire of her heart.

"Now, Mr. Parker, will you be so very kind as to show

me over your house-boat? After having run so many dangers and gone through so much to get here, I should be very sorry to leave without going thoroughly over it, and ascertaining many things that have always puzzled me. For it is highly improbable that I shall ever have the chance of going over a house-boat again."

"Oh, don't say that, Miss Durham. I hope you will come and see us again," remarked Jack politely.

"No, Mr. Ludlow, I shall never be able to do that, for you have no conception how I dread the water. I've lived for twenty years within two hundred yards of the river, and this is only about the fourth time I have risked my life in a boat. It is only to please that child that I would do such a thing. No, there is no time like the present, so, Mr. Parker, if you are quite ready and can manage to help me down that horrible ladder without my breaking my neck, I should like to see your beautiful boat now, if you please."

There was nothing for it, but for Lance to obey. He looked enquiringly at Madge, hoping that she might desire to come too, but Madge merely smiled back serenely at him and did not move out of the low, lounging chair in which she was comfortably ensconced.

"I have not finished my strawberries," she said in answer to his look, as she addressed herself again to the plate upon her lap. The last Lance saw of her as his head disappeared behind Aunt Margaret was a certain bored expression upon her sweet face and downcast eyes, whilst Jack sat a little apart from her and seemed little likely to make any effort to entertain her.

Why she had elected to remain where she was, Madge never quite knew, for certainly Mr. Ludlow had not hitherto paid her the slightest attention.

Yet no sooner was he left alone with her than he rose from his seat and took Lance's vacated chair, which was close beside her, and to her infinite surprise he propounded the following problem to her.

"I wish you would tell me something, Miss Durham. Have I ever seen you before?—in real life, I mean—or has it been only in my dreams that I have met you?"

The flush of colour which flooded her face from brow to neck was very pretty to look at, but surprised him considerably in his turn.

A London-bred young lady would have coquettled with the question, would have enquired archly concerning the usual nature of his dreams, or would have feigned ignorance in order to draw him out. Madge was unversed in the science of flirtation. She answered quite simply, although to her own knowledge her voice shook a little as she spoke.

"I danced with you at Lady Gray's ball two years ago."

"Then you recognised me?" he enquired in surprise.

"Instantly," she answered unhesitatingly, and quite unconscious of the flattery implied in the reply.

For a moment he did not speak. Only he looked at her with more interest and attention than he had bestowed upon her yet.

"I wonder why you did not say so yesterday?" he said presently.

Madge laid her empty plate down upon the tea-table by her side, before she replied. Then she laughed a little.

"Well, for two reasons. First you never gave me a chance of speaking to you at all, and secondly—well—it is not very complimentary you see, to find oneself wholly forgotten!"

"But I did not wholly forget you, since I have been puzzling out my memory of your face ever since. You must remember that I certainly can never have known your name, which must help to exonerate me in your eyes."

"I certainly never was told yours, and yet I remembered you," she answered, with unthinking haste.

Jack's pulses began to quicken. The subtlety of the flattery lay in the self-evident fact that she was not aware of it herself.

She was young and she was fair. It was the loveliest summer afternoon in the world. There was not a sound save the gentle ripple of the water among the boats astern, and the song of the birds in the woods, close to where the *Naiad* lay moored. On the further bank, the flat meadows by the river lay bathed in golden evening sunlight, and a vaporous haze clothed the distant landscape. It was a sweet dreamy day, breathing vaguely of love and of poetry, a day when it becomes dangerous for a man's peace of mind to be left alone with a fair-faced maiden.

From beneath them came the confused echoes of two voices in argument; Lance and Aunt Margaret inspecting the kitchen arrangements, and Antonio's shriller notes of explanation. Faint as the sounds were, they jarred a little upon Jack's new-born intensity of sensation. He drew a little nearer to her.

"You say that I danced with you that night?" he said softly.

"Yes, and don't you remember, you came up and asked me for another dance, but I was obliged to refuse. It made me very sorry, but I could not help myself, because old Aunt Durham had forbidden me, and I was still more sorry when you bowed and went away, for you looked quite cross with me for saying no."

"I remember it all now," he cried, a full recollection returning all at once to him. "You are the young lady who

told me you were never going to marry ! I hope you have changed your opinion since ?”

“ No, I have not changed at all, though it is not so much my opinion as Aunt Durham’s. She does not approve of marriage. It is not a matter of opinion with me, you see ; I only have to do as I’m told.”

“ Does not approve of marriage ! ” cried Jack, exceedingly surprised and not a little amused. “ That is all very well for your old aunt, who is over seventy, you say, but of course it is ridiculous in your case. You are quite certain to marry some day, in spite of your aunt’s singular prejudices.”

“ No,” answered Madge, seriously and simply. “ It is quite impossible for me ever to marry, because I have not a single penny in the world, and Aunt Durham would not leave me Fairmead if I were to marry. I assure you I have not the faintest desire ever to do such a thing.”

The extreme gravity and earnestness with which Madge uttered these words almost took Jack’s breath away. He was startled, he was even shocked, by what she said. Nothing could be more completely at variance than the appearance of this sweet, simple maiden with her candid eyes and innocent smile, and the horrible worldly wisdom of her words. There was something, too, almost repelling in the unblushing openness with which the subject of marriage fell from her girlish lips. The fact being that Madge had taken part in so many conversations relating to the holy estate of Matrimony ever since she was ten years old, that the topic had become to her a very prosaic and commonplace one. She was as unconcerned in the matter as though she had been a denizen of another world. Nor did it occur to her to be embarrassed in the very faintest degree because she was discussing the question with a good-looking young man seated within half a yard of her.

“ And so you prefer Fairmead and your aunt’s money to all the joys of a happy married life ? ” he said presently, with a little irrepressible scorn.

“ I am very fond of Fairmead,” answered Madge simply, not understanding in the least why he looked at her so disapprovingly. “ I have always been very happy here, and as to marriages, all those I have ever heard of seem to me to have made people horribly unhappy, especially the poor wives——”

“ Good Heavens ! ” cried Jack. “ I wish you could talk to my mother ; she would tell you a different story. Do you know it is dreadful to me to hear you speak like that ! As if you valued money more than—love ! ”

She turned her eyes fully upon him in mild surprise.

“ Oh ! I don’t think you understand me at all, Mr. Ludlow. I do not care about money—I never have any, in fact. But

I do care very much about my home, and I like to think that I shall always live here. Why, what should I do without the dear old place and the river? I could not bear to leave it. But as to the—the other thing you speak of—I did not talk about it at all. I know nothing about it myself—only—I have read of it in books——” Her eyes fell; a sudden bashfulness, the instinct of a womanly reserve, made her unwilling to pursue this other subject to its end. Jack watched her with an ever-growing absorption of interest. She was not then cold, and hard, and mercenary—only delightfully original and divinely innocent. She “knew nothing,” she said, of that “other thing” which her lips could not even name, and which had slipped off his, with such hardy rashness. Love was an unknown mystery to this maiden who could talk so glibly concerning the unsatisfactoriness of married life. How then had they brought her up, these two old women who had instilled such queer doctrines into her young mind?

Jack caught himself wondering whether it would be difficult to instruct her in that art of which she was so wholly ignorant, and whether, perhaps, the teacher might not find the lessons even more fascinating than the pupil!

It puzzled her when she looked at him again to find how intently the brown eyes were studying her, and to carry off the little embarrassment she said laughingly:

“Then there is a great prophecy in the Durham family which I must tell you about.” He listened with amusement whilst she repeated the old saw. “So that you see I am bound to be the third of the ‘maids’ to whom Fairmead is to belong, for after us there is only a terrible cousin—a very wicked man, whose name is not Durham at all. If I were to be so foolish as to marry, Aunt Durham has arranged in her will that Fairmead shall be sold sooner than permit it to fall into such bad hands.”

Jack thought he had never heard of such curious testimentary provisions in his life.

“It seems a shame for you, that on account of a stupid old prophecy——”

“Well, yes,” she interrupted quickly, with unexpected candour. “I confess I have thought that myself, too, sometimes. But then women are so very unhappy when they marry! Aunt Durham says that men are most deceitful creatures. As long as they are single they pretend to be delightful; in fact, up to the very day they are married they keep it up; but from the moment they have got an unfortunate woman into their power, then their true nature develops itself, and sometimes by actual wickedness and sometimes only by weakness, they succeed in making their lives perfectly miserable.”

"But surely you cannot believe that of all men!" cried Jack excitedly. "Why, my mother, for instance, is perfectly happy, and my father worships her."

"Oh, yes; I know, of course, that there are exceptions. Even Aunt Durham does not deny that, and although my own father spent all my mother's money, so that they were wretchedly poor, yet I think, in spite of it all, she was not altogether unhappy. You see, she was so good that she forgave him. But then it is hardly worth running the risk of so much unhappiness, is it? and certainly every male Durham that I have ever been told of seems to have brought trouble to his wife of some kind or other."

Jack was on the point of suggesting that to strike out into a fresh direction and to make trial of the male beings of other families might be the best course for the single ladies of the Durham family to pursue, when the voice of Aunt Margaret was heard from below:

"Madge, you really must come down and see this lovely room! Have you not done your strawberries yet?"

"Yes, Aunt Margaret, I am coming at once."

But as he was about to help her down Jack kept her for one moment to ask in a low voice, and with a singularly anxious glance into her face:

"You have not talked of all this—of the prophecy and of your aunt's theories—to Parker, have you?"

"To Mr. Parker!" cried Madge merrily. "Why, no, of course not." Then with a sudden gravity she added: "I do not know, indeed, why I have said all these things to you. I hope I have not wearied you—and—and—you will not talk about them, will you, to anybody?"

Jack swore by all his gods that he would never do so, and he experienced quite an irrational amount of joy as he told himself that at least she had given him her confidence, and that there was something of the nature of a secret betwixt them.

Madge then devoted herself very prettily and pleasantly to poor Lance, who had been longing to get back to her, while Jack, in the best of tempers, entertained Aunt Margaret, so that the little party of four were soon upon the most amicable terms. Presently Jack sat down to the piano and sang an old English ballad in his mellow, baritone voice, and Aunt Margaret was open-mouthed in applause of his musical talents, whilst Madge sat very still and silent, thinking how clever he was and what a strange, happy feeling it gave her to listen to his song, and it seemed to her as if something new and wonderful had this day come into her life—yet she knew not what it was, nor was she able to give it any name.

Presently the lengthening shadows and the red glow of

the western sunset warned Aunt Margaret that it was time to be going back.

The gentlemen, of course, offered to escort them home ; but Aunt Margaret, who had visions of the old lady sitting in the garden looking out for their return, was firm in refusing to permit them to do so.

"I would sooner be drowned !" cried she with heroic persistency.

Nothing was said concerning any future meeting, and the good lady, lulled into happy security, firmly believed that the *Naiad* would disappear into gayer scenes at the earliest opportunity, and wished an adieu to both young men which in its earnestness and impressiveness might well have been eternal.

At the very moment that the *Fairy* was fairly launched on her way down stream, there appeared on the meadows on the further bank, a gentleman in clerical garments, and wearing upon his head the regulation soft black felt wide-awake, which has become the recognised country hat of the Protestant priest. This gentleman stood there, making signals to the *Naiad*, and the last glimpse the two ladies had of their late entertainers ere they turned out of sight round the bend of the river, was Antonio getting ready the dinghy in order to go across to fetch the newcomer, whilst Ludlow and Parker shouted a hearty welcome to him from the upper deck.

"That is the new vicar of Cumpton-on-the-Hill," remarked Madge to her aunt.

"Dear me, Madge, how do you know him ?"

"I don't know him. Only the last time I rode up that way I saw him walking in the village of Cumpton, and the girl at the post office told me that it was Mr. Storey."

"It is a very poor living I believe, and a wretched vicarage. Poor man, he looks amiable, but half-starved. I suppose there is a wife, poor creature, and several wretched little children, probably. These clergymen are so improvident. They marry on nothing, and then starve ! How can any woman be so foolish ! Now Mrs. Storey, for instance, cannot possibly be so well off as the woman at our lodge."

Madge laughed.

"For once your pity is thrown away, Aunt Margaret. There is no Mrs. Storey. Mr. Storey is a bachelor."

"Indeed ? Well, for his own sake I am glad of it, poor man ! But what a good thing, Madge, that we came away when we did. It seems to me that we have perhaps done very wrong in making the acquaintance of two unmarried gentlemen. If we had stayed longer there would have been a third ! and as he is a fixture in the neighbourhood it might have been very awkward. Now Mr. Ludlow and Mr. Parker are birds of

passage, and we shall never see them again. So, as by good luck we have escaped an introduction to Mr. Storey, there can be no harm done by this little jaunt of ours. Even if Aunt Durham ever comes to hear of it we can justify ourselves to her on that score, my dear."

Madge plied her sculls in silence. She had decided to be her own steerer on the homeward voyage, so the skiff flew swiftly and straightly down the middle of the broad stream.

She did not answer her aunt's remarks. She had a vague instinct that she probably would see her new friends again, and that Aunt Margaret knew nothing at all about it. Her prophesies were no more likely to be fulfilled perhaps than that other Durham prediction of olden days which caused her so much disquietude.

"Though of course, as to Mr. Storey," added the girl to herself, "we shall certainly not be likely ever to see him again."

For, not having the Durham gift of prophecy herself, Madge could not foresee the how, when, and where of the brief, but important part, which the Reverend Cyril Storey was destined to play in the history of her life.

CHAPTER VI.

MADGE SHOWS SIGNS OF REBELLION.

" Some to church repair,
Not for the doctrine."

—POPE.

ON the following day, which was Sunday, that worthy and faithful creature Antonio was much exercised in his mind by reason of mysterious and unaccustomed proceedings on the part of the two gentlemen whom he served.

Shortly before half-past ten o'clock in the morning, whilst as yet the coffee and poached eggs were unprepared, Jack Ludlow came forth quietly from his cabin. He was attired, not in the customary flannels of creamy whiteness, but in a dark serge suit which he usually reserved for wet and chilly days.

"Breakfast non é ready, signor," gasped Antonio, who was laying the cloth. "Sall I prepare ze café?"

"No, get me a glass of milk and a roll," replied his master, an order which Antonio obeyed in wondering silence. After hastily swallowing this simple fare, Jack bade him get ready the dinghy.

"Shall I tell Monsieur Parkar?"

"Tell him, what?—tell him I've gone out if he asks. But don't disturb him. Mr. Parker is probably asleep. Don't

make a noise. I daresay he won't want breakfast for another hour."

Jack got into the dinghy and pulled himself quite out of sight up stream. Across the fields the church bells were ringing faintly and sweetly from the little spire in the village of Fairley.

"Come to church! Come to church!" they seemed to say, with a gentle and persistent reiteration.

Jack had never yet obeyed their summoning notes. Sunday newspapers, a pipe, a book dozed over in the shade, with a good many dreamy meditations upon the beauty of nature, had been the extent of this young man's Sabbath exercises. For these things, it is sad to relate, are infinitely more attractive to the ordinary young Englishman left to follow his own devices, than the monotonous drawl of the morning service, the stuffiness of a village church, and the unsavouriness of a village congregation in its best Sunday clothes.

But this morning Jack had other things in his mind. When he was well out of sight of the house-boat, he brought the dinghy to land upon the right bank of the river, tied her snugly and securely up underneath a sheltering willow which hung over into the stream, and strode gaily across the meadows in the direction of the village. Not long after his departure, the door of the other sleeping cabin was very cautiously opened about a couple of inches.

"Antonio!"

"Signor!"

"Was that Mr. Ludlow going out?"

"Si, signor."

"Where is he gone?"

"I do not know, signor; 'e did not say."

The door opened wider, and, to Antonio's amazement, Mr. Parker stepped forth fully arrayed in dark cloth coat and trousers, a stick-up collar, a pair of gloves in his hand, and a chimney-pot hat on his head.

Antonio nearly dropped the dishes he was carrying, in his astonishment at this apparition. Lance stuck his eye-glass fiercely into his eye.

"Now what are you staring at, you donkey? Get me some breakfast, and look sharp about it."

"Ze café is nearly ready, but ze eggs——"

"Never mind the eggs, get me a roll."

In silent astonishment Antonio obeyed, and in five minutes Mr. Parker had concluded his meal.

"Now put the cushions in the punt, and I want you to punt me across," said Lance.

Antonio, one of whose many qualifications was that he was an excellent waterman, quickly punted Lance to the opposite shore, and, giving a hasty glance round to make

sure that he was unobserved, the fat young man started at a good pace across the fields in the direction of the little church spire embosomed in trees in the distance.

In the little parish church of St. Peter and St. Paul, a tall young man, with a quiet grave face, stood up in his place that morning with the rest of the congregation. He occupied a secluded position on the north side of the church, close to a heavy whitewashed Norman pillar.

The little church was unrestored and exceedingly unlovely. High pews occupied the nave, an unsightly organ gallery blocked up the west end, a window of appallingly vivid red and orange lozenges dazzled the eyes at the eastern extremity. The clergyman was old and careless ; he gabbled the words of prayer and praise in a slip-shod fashion through his nose, and a clerk, as old and careless as himself, bawled out Amens in a loud, rasping voice, calculated to set the stoutest nerves on edge. The congregation were for the most part poor and homely; they came clattering up the uneven brick floor of the aisle, with noisy hob-nail boots—the men in smocks, the women in check shawls and poke straw bonnets. Here and there a farmer's family made a show of finery ; and gay coloured silk and shiny broadcloth cast a respectable halo over their humble surroundings.

But there was, by the time that Mr. Baskerville was well into the middle of the Confession, followed helter-skelter by the shrill-voiced clerk and the rest, not a sign of a lady or a gentleman in the church, save that one dark-eyed young stranger in the far corner. Only in the chancel there was a large unoccupied pew with crimson curtains on a rail drawn all round the top of it.

And presently a slight commotion arose at the west entrance—all heads were turned round. A respectably clad man, who might have been the village schoolmaster or the churchwarden, walked solemnly up the nave and held open the door of the chancel pew. The voices of the rustics faltered and failed, even the old clergyman half paused in the prayer as the great ladies of the parish, the Miss Durhams of Fairmead Hall, who were always unpunctual, sailed imposingly into their family pew.

After them came the Hall servants, Mr. Wilson the butler, and Mr. McQuean the head gardener, the portly cook, and the elegant lady's-maid, with one or two of the under-servants, a whole waggonette load of them, who took their places in vacant pews close under the pulpit. Then Mr. Baskerville recollected himself, and started off afresh at a harder pace than ever, as though to make up for lost time.

To the end of his days Jack never forgot that one vision he had of old Miss Durham standing up erect and stern in her pew, in her black satin gown and mantle, and her large

black silk bonnet with its nodding ostrich plumes, with her gold rimmed spectacles on the bridge of her aquiline nose, and the strong hard face that was often turned imperiously and scrutinizingly down the church to see who was in his place and who was missing. Next to her came Miss Margaret, with meek, gentle face and eyes bent always upon her book, like a pale shadow by the side of that austere visaged reality; and beyond her again was Madge, all in delicate white muslin with daisies in her straw hat, and there came such a glow upon her sweet face, and such an electric gleam of recognition lit up her blue eyes as they caught sight of the tall young man far away down the aisle, as may well have made his heart beat faster as he noted it from his distant corner.

It was just at this very moment, just as he had made sure that Madge had seen him, and yet had not been displeased at the sight, that, through the open doorway in the south aisle, left open by reason of the heat of the summer noon-day, Jack suddenly perceived an incoming form of familiar shape, yet unaccustomed aspect. It was Lance Parker, correctly adorned by the masterly hand of a Bond Street tailor, and bearing his best and shiniest Lincoln & Bennett in his hand, who, darkening for a moment the stream of sunlight in the open porch, advanced somewhat shyly and hesitatingly into the church.

Here he was pounced upon by the respectable individual who acted as pew opener, and, much to his dismay, promptly boxed in the very first pew close under the reading desk, where he found himself within a dozen yards of the ladies in the chancel.

Madge's eyes, opening wide with astonishment at this fresh apparition, telegraphed their intense amusement to Jack's distant corner, and it was utterly impossible to her to repress a slight smile.

The "Venite" was just beginning; Mr. Parker rose to his feet with the rest, as the harsh-voiced school-children in the western gallery started the first notes. He stuck his eye-glass into his eye, saw Madge's smile and glance, and turned sharply round.

His face, when he perceived his friend at the bottom of the church behind him, was a study. He coloured furiously, and for a minute looked horribly angry—then the thought of how each of them had tried to steal a march on the other struck them simultaneously. Jack grinned openly, and Lance was fain to conceal his mouth behind the shelter of his pocket-handkerchief.

Madge's eyes returned decorously to her prayer-book, and both these young gentlemen were very properly punished for the evil motives which had induced them to visit the

sacred edifice by the fact that she never looked up again at either of them, nor even turned her face ever so slightly in their direction from that moment to the end of the service.

Even when she followed her aunts out of church and passed close first to Lance, and subsequently to Jack, her eyelids were modestly lowered, and her little mouth pursed up into the primmest and gravest expression. Perhaps she guessed the reasons which had brought them to church, and perhaps she disapproved of them! Jack wondered if she did, and he felt a little bit ashamed of himself, and half wished he had not come.

When the two friends found themselves standing side by side outside the west door, the yellow chariot was just driving away with the three Miss Durhams inside and the coachman and footman on the box. Miss Margaret gave them a swift frightened look, but did not attempt to make any sign of recognition, whilst as to Madge, her face was completely turned away from them. They could see nothing of her but the coils of her sunny brown hair. She was apparently studying the distant landscape too attentively to notice any object near at hand.

It must be confessed that our two friends felt somewhat foolish when they turned round and looked at each other, and the hot walk back across the shadeless fields in their Sabbath Day garments was not a memory which they ever recalled with any pleasurable emotion.

"Who were those two strangers in church to-day?" demanded Miss Durham at luncheon.

Wilson, who was accustomed to give information required by his mistress even at meal times, answered respectfully that he believed them to be—"Two river gents as is a-stopping somewhere near Fairley Lock."

Mr. Baskerville, who with his old wife always lunched at the Hall on Sunday, here remarked, as he wiped his heavy mouth after a copious draught of ale, that the river gentry did not as a rule attend Divine Service.

"I cannot imagine what they came for!" cried Miss Durham in her usual imperious fashion.

"Perhaps," hazarded Madge, "it was to say their prayers."

Miss Margaret looked frightened, and cast an appealing look across the table at her niece. Was she going to let the cat out of the bag?

"My dear child," said the old lady impressively, "it was certainly for nothing of the kind. Men never act from simple and praiseworthy motives; there is in nine cases out of ten always some secondary and sinister impulse for their conduct, such as an innocent girl cannot readily discern. I may, however, venture to assure you from my knowledge of the usual deceitfulness of the sex—that those two young men

did not go to church to-day either to pray or to derive benefit from anything which they heard." And Miss Durham glared round the table as though to defy contradiction.

"My dear Madam," began Mr. Baskerville deprecatingly, for, as the only gentleman present, his soul, despite its habitual sluggishness, rebelled faintly against the old lady's sweeping accusations—but before he could proceed any further, Mrs. Baskerville, who sat next him, kicked him violently under the table, and the attack falling upon his gouty toe he wisely smothered any remonstrance he might have meditated with a portentous "Ahem!" and turned his attention anew to his hot roast beef.

Miss Durham having presented him to the living, it was perhaps scarcely politic to fall out with her. Both the good people were moreover well aware of the peculiar views and prejudices of their patroness, so that it was in quite a mild and docile voice that Mrs. Baskerville enquired presently.

"I hope however, dear Miss Durham, that you do consider that some men are fit to be trusted?"

"My dear, when men are as old as your husband," replied Miss Durham with uncompromising directness, "they have in a great many instances proved themselves to be worthy of consideration, and I must honestly admit that, having outlived the temptations of their earlier years, they are not so prone to fall into the failings natural to their sex. An old married man, and a clergyman—such as my friend here—is often a shining example that is of much benefit to mankind."

Mr. Baskerville bowed in recognition of the somewhat dubious compliment.

"What I do most strongly deprecate and abhor are those men who, unmarried, unprincipled, versed in all the odious iniquities and the world, go about inducing young women to sacrifice to them their lives and happiness, and too often their health and moral uprightness as well; regardless of all, so long as they can entrap them into a selfish and cruel marriage. Such men my nieces shall never be permitted even to know!"

"But, my dear Madam, marriage is surely a holy institution, ordained and specially blessed by the Almighty."

In virtue of his office, Mr. Baskerville, braving the hidden terrors of his wife's double-soled walking boots, could not resist from uttering this remonstrance.

"Marriage, Mr. Baskerville," replied the old lady, with dignity, "was no doubt originally intended to be what you say. But when you look round the world and see how many men have abused and degraded that once holy rite, and how impossible it is to guess beforehand that all men are not alike, you will not wonder so much that there are some few women left who, like ourselves, prefer to prove in their own

persons, the superior holiness and happiness of a single life. If you have done your luncheon, Mrs. Baskerville, we will go into the drawing-room."

"Oh, Madge, I have done something terribly wrong!" whispered poor Miss Margaret, as leaving the three old people to their coffee and their own devices, the two younger women made their escape into the garden. "I felt as if I should sink into the earth with remorse whilst your aunt was talking about those young men! I was so afraid you were going to let out that we knew them, and I feel so guilty!"

Madge was rather thoughtful, she pressed her aunt's hand and told her not to be unhappy.

"It was more my fault than yours," she said soothingly.

"We must never see them again," said Miss Margaret, with decision; "promise me, Madge, that you will not go on the river until the *Naiad* has gone away, then I shall feel happier."

"I don't think I can promise that," said Madge in a low voice. Her aunt looked at her anxiously. A horrible doubt flashed through her mind. Was it possible that the mischief had already been done—that in one brief hour, Madge had surrendered to a new and dangerous influence? Oh no, she could not conceive it to be possible!

All at once Aunt Margaret's thoughts went back to a score of years ago! She saw herself a timid gentle girl of three-and-twenty again. Just as some breath of a forgotten perfume, when we open a long-closed cupboard door, brings back vague memories with its faint, sickly odour, so did things out of that buried past, leap into life once more to her, as she looked at Madge's downcast face and trembling lip.

She remembered how someone, when she was young, had called her pretty; how happy she had been on certain starlit summer evenings long ago, when she had crept forth in the hush of the twilight—what rapture there had been in those stolen meetings—a rapture scarce realized or comprehended until all was over—all torn ruthlessly away from her, and the half-open door of her paradise rudely shut to, and she herself dragged roughly back, fainting and wounded, from that enchanted threshold! Ah! how long ago that was! Even the pain of it had all died away—years and years ago!

Yet Aunt Margaret's heart beat a little to-day as she recalled it; watching Madge as she stood upon the lawn before her, pulling a crimson rose to pieces between her slender fingers.

Was Madge's fate to be as hers had been?

But no, surely that was impossible! That little history out of the long ago of her own life had lasted for many weeks—one whole golden summer! There had been time for her to be unwittingly drawn into things that she had

never contemplated, and which might have been no doubt her ruin and her misery. But Madge knew nothing: there had been no time, besides, the thing was at an end, it had never indeed begun—there could be no danger in her case. Oh no, it was very different, there was nothing to be uneasy about for her!

Yet when Madge looked up from the fragments of her tattered rose and spoke out at last—Aunt Margaret was uneasy, very uneasy.

“Aunt Margaret,” she said stoutly, “you must not trouble yourself. We will not go to tea with them again, since you think we did wrong; but I do not believe that the *Naiad* will go away, and if I meet my friends again I do not intend to give them up. It is cruel of Aunt Durham to say that all men are wicked. Mr. Parker is not, I am sure—neither is Mr. Ludlow—they have been kind to us, and I like them—why may I not have friends as other girls have?”

“But not *young men*, my dear! Not *young men*!”

“I cannot help their being young men, auntie. You speak as Aunt Durham does, as though they were wolves! You may be right that it is safer never to marry. I do not want to marry; no one perhaps will ever ask me to do so, and if they do, I shall refuse, but it is pushing things too far that one may not know gentlemen and be friends with them. With me these two men must be friends always—I cannot look on them as wolves!”

She spoke a little hotly, and there was a red flush on either cheek. Aunt Margaret felt that things must be bad indeed when a Miss Durham of Fairmead flatly refused to recognise the vulpine element in the male nature. Yet prudence restrained her from saying plainly:

“If you make them into friends they will soon aspire to be lovers.”

Only she took the girl’s hands in hers and kissed her tenderly.

“My dear,” she said, and there was a moisture in her faded eyes, “I will always stand by you—always—whatever happens!”

It was a promise that Madge lived to remind her of, although at the time she attached no sort of importance to the somewhat irrevolent words—she did not know indeed what her aunt meant by them. Aunt Margaret often said sweet foolish things of which the interpretation was obscure, and of which nobody took any notice.

Late that night Madge lay wide awake upon her bed. It was eleven o’clock, and she had been in bed about an hour. The window was open, for it was hot, and the curtains were drawn back. Madge liked to lie and look at the stars. All at once she became aware of a curious redness glowing in the heavens, and in the midst of many vague waking dreams

it began to arrest her attention. The strange radiance gradually intensified and deepened, until the whole sky seemed to be alight with it.

Madge sat up in bed and looked at it, rubbing her eyes to make sure that she was really awake.

Just at this moment there came a tap at her door, and almost before she could say "Come in," the little maid who waited on her—a girl out of Fairley village whom she had taken a fancy to—came breathlessly in.

"Oh, Miss, are you awake! Such a dreadful thing has happened! The farm is on fire!"

Madge sprang out of bed, and began instinctively putting on her clothes.

"I thought you might be frightened, Miss, at the light," continued Caroline excitedly. "Mr. Wilson he have woke up the ladies, and Miss Durham said all the men-servants was to go—and the groom has been sent off on a horse for the fire-engine, and the indoor men as well as the gardeners has all gone off to see if they can help. One of the farm boys came down just as Mr. Wilson was shutting up the house—and he says as it is the house, not the farm buildings, as has caught fire, and all the children in bed, Miss! And them two gentlemen as are living on the river, they has come down in their boat on purpose to help. Oh, Miss Madge! you are never going out?"

"Yes I am, Caroline, and so are you. Go and get your bonnet on—here find me a warm cloak and a pair of thick boots. We will run down the back stairs. Think of it, Caroline! all those poor little children! we may be able to do some good and carry the baby home here, anyhow, make haste!"

"Oh, Miss, but what would your aunts say at your going out at this hour of night!"

"Never mind about my aunts, Caroline. I shall not ask them. Do as I tell you!"

And that was the second time that day that Madge Durham had set her aunts at naught.

CHAPTER VII.

JACK BECOMES A HERO.

"Unbounded courage and compassion joined
Alternately proclaim him good and great,
And make the hero and the man complete."

—ADDISON.

THE two young men on the *Naiad* had been smoking an after-dinner pipe. It was a beautiful still starlight evening. Jack lay on his back on the cushions, his arms behind his head, his eyes fixed upon the spangled sapphire skies.

Lance, a little way off, lolled in an easy chair and puffed away vigorously at his favourite briar-wood. Generally they talked a good deal, being excellent company to one another, but to-night they were strangely silent.

If such a thing could have been conceived possible between two men who had pulled so well together under all kinds of circumstances—it would seem almost as though there was a certain restraint between them.

It was intangible—a something in the air—an indescribable chill that made all conversation an effort and every subject that was started fall flatly to ground, whilst one subject which each desired to avoid was dexterously eluded over and over again.

They had laughed, it is true, over the morning's adventure—what else indeed was there to be done save to laugh?—but they had not laughed it off, and in the mind of each there remained a residuum of vague disquiet that neither could shake off.

“What in the name of all that is wonderful made old Lance go to church in a go-to-meeting get up?” was what Jack asked of himself in vain the whole day long. Whilst Lance put the same question more tersely and emphatically still in his own mind:

“What the devil took Jack there?”

And neither of them found the obvious answer to these queries at all agreeable to contemplate.

At the present moment Lance's meditations might have been rendered somewhat as follows:

“Why the deuce can't I have my chance as well as Jack. Because a man has everything on earth—looks, money, birth—is that a reason why he should cut out another fellow in other ways too? All is fair they say in love and war—well, let the best man win then! No, not that exactly either—for of course Jack *is* the best man—but he doesn't want—what I want. He will just make a play of it as he has often done, but it is not going to be play to me. I've never felt like this before—but then I've never seen another woman in the least like her.”

And meanwhile Jack lay on his back and looked at the stars—and thought—but ah! no, I cannot tell you what Jack thought about, for it was all too vague and sweet to put into words. Only after a long while he said to himself:

“A man would have to earn her good opinion before he could hope to win her heart.”

Just at that moment there shot up into the dark vault of Heaven a glittering tongue of orange light.

Both young men sprang suddenly to their feet.

“By Jove, what was that?” cried Lance.

They watched in breathless silence for a few seconds. A

dull red glow, deepening and widening every moment, spread slowly but surely over the eastern sky.

Then another shoot of flame, this time more vivid and brilliant than the last.

“It is a fire!” said Jack below his breath.

“Good Heavens, it must be Fairmead Farm!”

Not another instant was wasted. The two friends understood each other too thoroughly to lose time in discussion. The new excitement, perilous no doubt with unknown adventure, made them one once more. Swiftly and almost silently they got ready the boat, chucking in as many buckets and water-cans as the *Naiad* was furnished with, a coil or two of rope and a couple of blankets—then they jumped in, Antonio shoved her off, and in less time than it has taken to describe they were sculling with all their might and main down stream.

For the first time to-day neither of them was thinking about Madge.

At Fairmead Farm a scene of indescribable confusion reigned. The fire had broken out in the servants' bedroom under the sloping roof, and had quickly spread to the adjoining passage at the end of which the three younger children slept.

The farmer and his wife, who had not gone to bed when the first alarm was given, had endeavoured to get up to their assistance, but were driven back by volumes of smoke, and soon it became evident that the staircase was in flames, and the three children cut off in what must soon prove a living tomb.

Meanwhile many of the neighbours, aroused by their shouts and by the glare of the flames, quickly assembled, and presently all the available male beings from the Hall arrived upon the scene, so that quite a crowd was gathered about the farm-house. But though all were ready and eager to help, nobody knew what to do. It must be quite half-an-hour before the fire-engine of the neighbouring country town could possibly be expected to arrive on the spot, even if the greatest expedition were used, and meanwhile what was to be done to save those three poor little children in the upper bedroom? The baby, who had been with his mother, was safe, and Lucy the elder girl, whose bedroom was on the ground floor; but for Emmy and Tom and little curly-headed Sammy, what was there to be done? Close pressed together in the small diamond-paned window the three heads and little white scared faces could be plainly seen by the crowd below: Tom crying bitterly, Sammy shaking and shivering with fear, and Emmy doing her best, poor child, to comfort them both. It was a piteous spectacle, and the heart-rending cries of their agonized mother and the desperate

attempts to face the overpowering smoke and to climb a ladder set up against the house on the part of the unhappy father, who had already sprained his leg badly in his unavailing efforts, added to the horrors of the dreadful scene.

No one knew what to advise or what to begin. One or two tried to scale the ladder, but were beaten back by the flames. Others threw up a rope towards the window, but the little hands were not strong enough to hold it, nor could they certainly have managed to tie it to the window bar with sufficient firmness to be of the slightest use. Some recommended that the children should jump out on to extended mattresses or blankets, but the little things either did not understand or were afraid to make the attempt ; and only cried more bitterly than ever, and so some, and they by far the greater number, shook their heads, and groaned and did not hesitate to express their opinion that there was nothing for it but to abandon them to their fate. And meanwhile the flames crept on nearer, and nearer, and the black smoke belched forth, in gusts that became more frequent at every instant—for nobody had hit upon any plan for endeavouring to keep the fire at bay.

Just at this moment when matters were at their worst, when some ran one way and some another, when some shouted incoherent orders which nobody heeded, whilst others contented themselves with wailing and weeping and wringing their hands, a boat shot swiftly down to the landing-stage on the river and two gentlemen sprang out into the midst of the helpless crowd.

In a few instants all was changed. Everyone instinctively made way for the new comers, who instantly assumed that they must be obeyed, and took the lead over the affrighted people.

“Now, my men, where are your pails ?” cried out Jack : “fetch the buckets from the kitchen and the pans from the dairy.”

Everyone dispersed quickly, and in a very few minutes a regular *cordon* was established between the river and the burning house, and a low hissing sound continuously kept up began to proclaim that the fire had encountered its natural enemy.

Lance glanced up at the house. “Those children ?” he said in a low voice to Jack.

“Yes, I know,” answered Jack with a nod, then aloud, “How long before the engine can get here ?”

“Near on half-an-hour, sir,” answered a voice.

“Oh, sir, they will be burnt alive long before help can reach us !” cried poor Gates, their father.

“Not at all, my man !” said Lance heartily. “We’ll save

them yet, somehow," then aside to Jack, "The roof will never hold out so long."

"No, they must be got out. Gates, take your wife back and make all the women stand further off, they can do no good and are only horribly in the way."

Somehow the hopefulness of their voices and the brisk short orders issued right and left inspired the despairing crowd with hope and courage. Every direction that the two strange gentlemen uttered was eagerly carried out, and the long double line of men—the great Mr. Wilson standing in his shirt-sleeves next to the cow-herd—worked away with steady and unflinching energy.

Just then, with a horrible crash and a blinding flash of the angry forked flames and a deafening roar of falling bricks and timbers, a portion of the roof and a large stack of chimneys fell in.

For a moment or two even Lance and Jack held their breath in horror. Until the smoke cleared away it was not possible to tell whether the wreckage had not fallen upon that upper bedroom, and whether the unhappy children had not been suddenly swept to their doom. A groan of terror arose, followed again by a ringing cheer, as, after a breathless interval, the window reappeared once more untouched, and the three white faces were still to be seen, huddled together at the open casement.

But there was evidently now not a moment to be lost. Jack silently wound a long rope about his waist.

"Let me go, Jack," said Lance at his elbow.

"No, no, old chap. I am much more active than you are and lighter—and the ladder isn't up to much weight I fancy."

"Oh, but Jack! There's your mother you know, and your people. Your life is valuable to so many, and mine isn't worth a rush to anybody but myself—do let me go."

Unseen in the darkness, Jack gripped his friend's hand.

"Thanks, old chap, but it must be me. You see, it wouldn't give those little kids half a chance if you went, and there isn't really any time to lose."

He spoke very quietly, with that calmness and apparent want of emotion in the face of danger, which is the true characteristic of an English gentleman.

Lance said no more. He too saw the force of the argument, and cursed his weight and unwieldiness which rendered him incapable of taking his friend's place.

"Life won't be worth much to me if old Jack is killed!" he thought, as he helped to steady the ladder against a still firm corner of the brickwork, "and how on earth should I be able to break it to Lady Mary!"

As to Jack, he set his teeth and tried hard not to think about his mother.

Perhaps as he battled his way up through the blinding smoke and scorching heat to the rescue of those helpless children, with a cool head and steady nerves and all the tension of a great and noble deed strengthening every fibre of his body into steel, he was less to be pitied than the man whose only work it was to stand patiently below, helping with others to steady the rickety ladder, and waiting in an agony of suspense for the final result—whatever it might be.

It is one thing to do a splendid thing yourself at the risk of your own life, but quite another to be the powerless witness of that deed as performed by the dearest friend you have in the world. To do the thing, is to some natures easy enough, but to stand passively by whilst it is done, is one of the hardest things on earth.

And then there happened something that was rougher still on poor Lance Parker.

Amidst a silence only broken by the hiss and roar of the flames, Jack had accomplished his first journey in safety, and Emmy, the eldest of the three children, was safely dropped into the eager arms held out to receive her, and Jack half way up the ladder again close to the fatal window, when Madge and her maid came hurrying along the road from the Hall. The wild scene which met their eyes was indeed appalling. The lurid light, the volumes of black smoke, the little crowd of women with white, upturned faces, the dark groups of men nearer to the house, all combined to make up one of those pictures which dwell in the memory to the end of life.

Madge, on the threshold of that terrible scene, stood still for a few moments absolutely paralyzed with horror. What was going on ? What were they all doing ?

Nobody noticed her, no one even looked at her. Only every eye was fixed upon a spot where at intervals between the blinding gusts of flame and smoke the figure of a man seemed to hang alone against the burning house.

“ What is he doing ? Who is it ? ” she said hurriedly to a woman in the crowd who stood next her ; the woman did not recognise her, she answered without so much as turning her eyes.

“ He be going up for them two poor childer—he’s got Emmy down—it’s Tom and Sammy Gates as is up there—didn’t you see them at the winder ? The poor lambs ain’t got no strength left by now—he’ll have to get into the room if he wants to get ‘em out ! ”

“ Who is it ? ” repeated Madge under her breath.

“ It’s one of them gents as lives in that barge thing up along Fairley Meadows——”

Madge listened to no more. There shot through her heart a pang so wild and keen, that no physical pain that she

had ever endured was in the least equal to it. For a moment the whole story was plain to her. These two men, her new friends, had come to give their help, and it was Jack Ludlow who was risking his own life to save Farmer Gate's little children !

Where was his friend? Why had he let him do this thing? Madge pushed her way through the people, and presently she saw Lance holding the ladder with half-a-dozen other men.

She was by his side in a moment.

Lance looked up and saw her. He never forgot her face, illumined by the glare of the lurid flames, yet pale as ashes in its terror, with wide-opened eyes full of misery and reproach.

"You let him go? You let him do this thing alone and did not stop him?" she did not speak the words, but that was what her eyes said to him.

"Go back, for God's sake, Miss Durham!" cried Lance. "You might get hurt; there are burning wood and sparks constantly falling; go farther back I beseech you!"

But she took no notice of his entreaties. Only her trembling lips just framed the question :

"Will he be able to do it? Will he be killed?" and the anguish in her blue eyes was so unspeakable, that Lance would have given half his existence to have been in his friend's place at that moment.

"No, no," he answered with a certainty, he was far from feeling, "he will come back safely and he will bring the children dead or alive."

Whether, indeed he would be able to save them, or even come out himself alive from that burning house, seemed, at that moment, to be more than doubtful. The flames had now all but reached the fated room, and the children, either in terror at their near approach or else half scorched and smothered by the heat, were no longer visible at the window. Jack had disappeared into the house in search of them. It seemed likely enough that the children must already have perished, and that he would lose his own life in a vain effort to find them.

Madge hid her face in her hands shudderingly. What she underwent during those terrible moments of suspense she never forgot to her life's end.

But help was already at hand. All at once there arose a confused murmur of voices and a great commotion in the rear of the crowd. Then a thundering of wheels, a galloping of horses along the high road, whilst ringing hurrahs of welcome rent the air as the long expected fire-engine clattered noisily on to the scene.

In a moment all was changed. The hose was playing

against the house, the fire-escapes were set up, a strong iron ladder replaced the cranky wooden one, whose topmost bars were already beginning to smoulder and fall away into charred fragments, and three stalwart firemen ran nimbly up one after the other to the rescue.

The children were brought out first ; they were both unhurt though half suffocated and nearly paralysed with fear, and the scene of delight and joy as they were given back thus from the jaws of a horrible death into their parents' arms, was quite indescribable.

As for poor Jack, he was found stretched insensible upon the floor of the little garret, his head having been hit by a falling beam, which had knocked him down on first entering by the window ; so that had not the firemen arrived just at the very moment they did, not only would poor little Tom and Sammy have perished, but my hero himself would have bid a not inglorious farewell to this troublesome and naughty world, and this veracious history would never have been written.

As it was, he awoke to consciousness very shortly after, and found himself lying in a cool green meadow, propped up in Lance Parker's arms, whilst several people holding lanterns, were bending anxiously over him, and the village doctor was applying a bandage to his head and feeling him all over to see that no bones were broken.

And as he opened his eyes somebody said sobbingly :

“God bless you, sir, for the noble deed you've done to-night in going after my children.”

“Are they safe, Gates ?” were his first words.

“Yes, all safe, thank the Lord and you, sir. Miss Madge have taken them off and my missus with her, to the Hall.”

That was how Jack came to know that Madge had been a witness of his deed of heroism.

Presently he was able to get up ; he was not after all seriously hurt, only his head ached from the blow he had received, and his right arm was a good deal scorched and bruised, and was painful when he attempted to move it.

The flames were now nearly extinguished, and the right side of the house was saved almost intact. So the crowd began to disperse to their homes, leaving only Gates and a few of the farm labourers to watch the last exertions of the firemen.

In the grey of the early summer dawn, Lance sculled his friend back to the *Naiad*. The cool hush of the beautiful river, whose banks were wrapped in soft clouds of morning mists, with not even a bird awake to stir their silence, struck the two friends with a strange sense of calm after all the turmoil and excitement of the past night.

Jack lay back in the stern, wrapped by many careful

hands in rugs and blankets. He was worn out with the hard work of the part he had played, and felt weak and somewhat faint, yet he was certainly not unhappy. He had done a gallant deed, and Madge had been there to see it done! He would have been less than mortal had his pulses not throbbed with emotion at the thought. He wondered how she had looked, what she had said, whether her heart had swelled with pride at his daring, or quailed with fear for his safety.

And whilst he wondered, Lance, from the other end of the boat, spoke.

"Miss Madge gave me a message for you, Jack," he said in a stiff, hard voice, as though he were repeating a lesson he had been conning a great many times over to himself. "When you got better, I was to tell you that she thinks you did a very splendid thing, and that to the end of her life she will never cease to regard you as the bravest and noblest of men."

"Thank you, Lance," said Jack very softly and humbly, and he could not say a word more, by reason of an odd lump in his throat, which seemed to prevent him from speaking.

But neither then, nor ever after, did Jack Ludlow know quite what it cost Lancelot Parker to deliver Madge's message correctly.

CHAPTER VIII.

HEART BURNINGS

Alas ! how light a cause may move
Dissension between hearts that love !
Hearts that the world in vain had tried.

—MOORE.

"I THINK it will be a great bore!"

"Bore or no bore, it will have to be done, Agnes. For it is not only that Lady Mary will take no denial, but your father himself has written to me in most urgent terms about this picnic for Thursday."

Agnes Verinder yawned. "Fancy papa being 'urgent' about anything on earth," she murmured presently, laying her head back amongst the orange satin cushions of the sofa on which she was reclining. "What on earth can it matter to him whether we go to a picnic or stop in Town and drive down to Ranelagh!"

Mrs. George Verinder pursed up her lips. She was not at all unaware of the matrimonial schemes which had been mooted for her niece's future, but she conceived it no part of her duty to betray family secrets, so like the wise and discreet woman that she was, she answered nothing at all.

"Mrs. George," as she was generally called, kept her eyes discreetly fixed upon the slippers she was embroidering for her father. Agnes lay back on the sofa, doing nothing at all. In the mornings she hardly ever did anything, until it was time to go out for the daily stroll in the Row. They had been at a late ball last night, and the beauty was still sleepy. The sunblinds were drawn down in the little house in Hans Place which Mrs. George Verinder had rented for the season, and the subdued sunshine came robbed of half its radiance into the pretty, cool room. Mrs. George sat close to the windows in order to catch the most of the light for her work. Agnes watched her for some minutes in silence.

"The fact is," she said presently, "papa is quite infatuated by Lady Mary Ludlow; he must have been in love with her once, I believe, don't you think so, aunt?"

"Very likely, my dear."

"There can be no other reason for his insisting upon our going on the river. Jack Ludlow never did interest me much, he is such a good young man, you know."

"Is not that better than being a bad young man?" enquired Mrs. George with a smile.

"Possibly, from a mother's point of view. But then I am not a mother. Besides, a long day's expedition is such an undertaking! I hate trains! fancy an hour and a half's journey in this heat! One comes out covered with blacks, and with dust in every crease of one's clothes—and then, as a matter of fact, I have absolutely nothing whatever suitable to wear."

Mrs. George laughed. "Ah, that, I suspect, is at the bottom of your unwillingness to go to poor Mr. Ludlow's water-party; he ought to be very much flattered, my love."

"Oh, not at all; he probably doesn't know serge from satin. Jack, as a boy, was most undiscerning."

Agnes rose languidly from her couch and went and stood by the tall mantelshelf, idly picking up one little china knick-nack after another just to look at it, as if she had never seen it before and then to set it down again in its place. She was regally tall, with a figure that was absolutely faultless. The cream white of her skin contrasted almost dazzlingly with her dark hair and eyes and with the clean-drawn curved line of her eye-brows.

Agnes Verinder's beauty was of a high order. She was no mere pretty woman of fashion, but a goddess-like creature, who would have commanded the admiration of her fellow creatures in whatever age or country she had chanced to be born. It was a somewhat uncommon type, and even those who were not specially attracted by it could not withhold their tribute of praise to its undeniable superiority. With this grand, Juno-like appearance, the languid indo-

lence of the girl's manner, the slow, lazy speech, the movements full of sleepy grace, like some half-awakened, sleek-coated panther, were strangely and singularly in harmony. It was interesting to watch her, if nothing more, and those who watched her often wondered what sort of mind and heart that great, beautiful person contained. Only Mrs. George perhaps, on the whole face of the earth, knew how very little she possessed of either.

"I suppose," said Agnes tentatively, "I couldn't take Major Lawley on the river with us, could I, aunt?"

Mrs. George Verinder set two or three stitches into her embroidery before she answered.

"Such a question seems scarcely worth a reply," she said at last, somewhat coldly. "You know that you cannot."

"Not correct, I suppose?" said Agnes, with an air of indifference, examining a china pug attentively.

"It would be most undesirable from every point of view," answered her aunt with great decision. Then she rose and began folding up her work and putting it away into a basket. "I should like to enquire, merely as a matter of curiosity, Agnes, what are your intentions with regard to Major Lawley?"

Agnes laughed outright. When she laughed, her mouth which was rather large, opened fully, displaying an even double row of the whitest teeth imaginable.

"My dear aunt," she cried, "I always thought it was the gentleman, and not the lady, whose 'intentions' were enquired into! How can *I* have any intentions? I only intend to amuse myself."

"That is exactly the pith of the matter, it seems to me, my dear," replied Mrs. George, drily. "Whilst *you* amuse yourself, that unfortunate man is being led on to his destruction, for you certainly cannot intend to marry Hugh Lawley, I presume?"

"At any rate I do not intend to do so until I am asked," answered Agnes with a yawn. "Is it time to go out, aunt? I will go and put on my hat."

Later on, seated beneath the shady trees on the north side of the Row, Agnes, watching until her aunt's attention was safely engaged by a passing acquaintance, said, in a low voice to a man who was sitting beside her:

"I've tried it on, but it's no use."

"About Thursday?"

"Yes; you'll have to endure existence without me for a whole day. It seems that I may not invite anybody. The party is made up."

"I suppose I could find myself down there by accident?"

"What, down at Fairley?"

"Why not? A spirit of adventure might, on that par-

ticular day, induce me to explore the waters of the upper Thames, and if a starving acquaintance passed you by at lunch-time——”

“What a brilliant idea!” interrupted Agnes, turning to him with a scornful laugh.

Major Lawley looked at her earnestly—he did not quite understand her.

“Would you not like me to come?” he murmured sentimentally.

“Of course I should like it. I should be delighted. You would amuse me immensely.”

“More than the cousin?”

“He is not my cousin, if you mean Mr. Ludlow. Yes, you would certainly amuse me much more than he does. At the same time the plan is impracticable.”

“Why so?” His face fell.

“Because I could not possibly be a party to such a flagrant breach of good manners.”

Major Lawley coloured.

“Neither could, or would, I invite you to lunch at another man’s picnic-party, however hungry you might be,” she continued remorselessly. “You would not have the pleasure of so much as a glance, for I should certainly not even look at you as you went by.”

“In that case——” he began angrily.

“In that case you had better, perhaps, remain in Town.”

“The fact of the matter is,” he burst forth, with half-smothered rage, “you want to be free of me, so that you may have a good innings with that fellow, Ludlow.”

“Have I not just told you that he does not amuse me?”

“Possibly not. But he is rich, and he will be a lord. Your friends probably want to marry you to him.”

For a few moments Agnes was silent. She looked straight in front of her at the long row of riders passing up and down beyond the railings. But it is doubtful whether she saw any of them. It was literally the very first time that the idea had ever suggested itself to her. She was very much struck by it. No doubt of it; that was what they all meant; her father, and her aunt, and Lady Mary! How ridiculous of them to think they could settle a marriage out of hand for her, without even consulting her! The thought of it made her smile.

Hugh Lawley, who was watching her anxiously, took a little heart of grace when he saw her smile. He loved her so blindly that there was nothing he would not submit to at her hands.

“Why do you smile?” he murmured. “Is it that you are above that sort of thing, and that I am wrong?”

"No, you are perfectly right. Mr. Ludlow *is* rich and he *will* be a lord. You never spoke truer words."

"*Et après?*"

She gave him one of those brilliant smiles by which she could always win him back in spite of all her perversity.

"Well—nothing! I don't suppose it matters to me, does it?"

His face softened. "Ah! after all your heart is as good as gold," he murmured in her ear. She nodded with a little mocking movement of her firm cut chin. "And you will give up that water party—for my sake?" almost in a whisper.

"Certainly not; do not be foolish. I am obliged to go."

He rose quickly and held out his hand to her. She laid her fingers in his and said, with a confident smile, in that slow, indolent voice of hers, as she looked up into his eyes, "We shall meet to-night at the Hallerton's ball."

"I do not know; I am not sure," he replied coldly, as he lifted his hat to both ladies and walked away down the Row.

But Agnes Verinder knew. She was quite sure of her slave—sure of his devotion and his forgiveness, and quite sure that by a smile or by a frown she could do exactly as she pleased with him.

She watched him, as he walked away, with a certain critical admiration in her large sombre eyes.

It was an upright, soldierly looking figure, a trifle too broad backed to be symmetrical, and a thought too short to be graceful. Still, Hugh Lawley was considered to be a good-looking fellow, and no woman need have been ashamed to own him for a lover.

"He is very useful to me," thought the beauty, as she watched him shouldering his way through the crowd. "I don't quite know what I should do without him. I am fond of him, too, in a way. Quite fond enough to prefer his society to that of most other men, but as to marrying him, as auntie rightly remarked, it's not to be thought of for a moment! I shall have to do better for myself than that!"

A little later, sauntering slowly back to Hans Place by the side of Mrs. Verinder, her thoughts ran in a different channel.

"I wonder it never struck me before. Of course, Jack Ludlow will be Lord Castlemere, and Castle Regis is the sort of place that I should like. And then, what with my money and his, we should be rich. It really is not at all a bad idea for the future, although I don't feel inclined to be hurried into matrimony until I've had as much enjoyment out of life as I want. But—for the future, it might do very well. Only," she added, with a little grimace of weariness and disgust, "only I do wish Jack Ludlow were not so dull!"

However, it is nearly a year since I have seen him, and he may have improved. Last year, I remember, he bored me horribly."

But she raised no further objections to going to the picnic.

Meanwhile, on board the *Naiad*, active preparations were going on apace. Jack's wounded arm got better rapidly. Sometimes, indeed, he wished it would not get well so fast, for he had learnt, in these days, to look out for the gentleplash of a certain pair of sculls that broke the stillness of the slumbrous afternoons, with a daily regularity.

The slender back of a white-frocked girl would suddenly appear against the greenery of the island beyond ; a knot of gold-brown hair, a jaunty little sailor hat ; then, as the boat drew nearer, a face would turn quickly round and two blue eyes would flash their welcome into his.

"How is the poor arm, Mr. Ludlow?" would cry the bright young voice to him, as the rower rested for a moment idly on her sculls. "Is he really better, Mr. Parker? Are you taking good care of him? He must not think of using it yet, you know."

Then would come the cheery answers of the two young men, to whom this moment was the most blessed of the day. Entreaties to stop and to come on board, always laughingly declined with references to the horror of the aunts were she to indulge in such unlawful lingerings. Then, with a little nod, she would glide away down the silent stream again and the bend of the river take her swiftly away from their sight.

At first she had brought peaches and hot-house grapes, and bunches of flowers as little attentions to the invalid, and never, surely, had fruits tasted more luscious, nor flowers smelt sweeter than these simple offerings which Madge's hands transferred to theirs.

This daily visit of inquiry became, at last, the centre of existence, around which the lives of these two foolish young men were both entwined. And yet, curiously enough, that odd sense of strained reserve between the friends, grew and increased upon them day by day.

Madge's name was never mentioned between them. Regularly at a certain hour they came back to the *Naiad* and sat waiting upon the deck, but neither ever said what he waited for, nor was her visit ever touched upon between them. They were merry enough whilst she was there, in those few brief seconds, when she paused to put her little category of questions, and to exchange a few sentences with an equal graciousness with them both, but neither before she came nor after she had gone, did either of them hazard the most distant allusion concerning her to one another.

So the week wore on until the Tuesday before the Thurs-

day of the water party. Madge, like a white-robed dream, had come and gone, and after the very last faint splash of her sculls had died away in the distance, the two friends had gone up stream to fish in the punt leaving Antonio, who was already deep in preparations of various kinds for the great occasion, to the full enjoyment of his solitude and his culinary conceptions.

They had a happy afternoon together. They were fortunate in the shady backwater near the Weir, which they selected for their operations ; the sun was not too bright, and the gudgeon took freely. Sport was decidedly better than usual, and the spirits of the sportsmen were consequently of the best. Whenever they talked, they went back to reminiscences of their school and college days—reminded one another of certain fishing expeditions at Eton, of certain other river incidents at Oxford. Coming home they laughed merrily together over these recollections, spoke of mutual friends, sighed over some who were dead, and laughed over others who had become sober fathers of small families. There was all the freedom and the ease of their old friendship, and yet, down below, underlying it all, was always that one forbidden topic which was skilfully steered clear of by mutual consent, and which constituted the grain of discomfort and restraint in their otherwise untroubled intercourse. Sometimes, indeed, they came perilously near to it ; once they spoke about the fire, and the little Gates' children who had been saved, and about the chances of eggs and poultry to be obtained for Thursday from the farm ; but when, by chance, they touched upon these things, there was such a mutual effort to pull back in time that not once were the ladies at Fairmead involved in the most casual manner in the mention of them.

To-night, however, the ice was destined to be broken. After dinner, the friends sat smoking in the saloon, for the night was somewhat chilly, and Lance was engaged in making out a list of the guests, and in writing down the items of the *ménü* for the lunch, whilst Jack, lounging in the deep armchair, dozed over the evening paper which had just been sent up from the station.

Suddenly Lance, whose back was turned to him, twisted himself round in his chair, and pen in hand, addressed himself with a startling abruptness to his friend :

“Have you invited Miss Durham and her Aunt, Jack?”

There was a perceptible pause. Jack's face was hidden behind *The Globe*—Lance waited.

“No,” he said at last, rather slowly. “No, I have not invited them.”

“You will do so then, I imagine, to-morrow?” persisted Mr. Parker.

Jack got up, throwing the paper on the floor by his side as he did so. He took his pipe out of his mouth, went across to a table opposite him and shook the white ash into a little china saucer that stood upon it. Lance's eyes followed him keenly. There was a brief silence broken only by the tap tap of the bowl of the pipe against the saucer. The air seemed charged with electricity.

"No," said Jack again deliberately. "I do not intend to invite them."

Lance got up. He stuck his glass fiercely into his eye after a fashion he had when he was in earnest, there was an odd throbbing about the muscles of his throat, and his face was a deep brick red colour. Jack, on the contrary, was a shade paler than usual.

"Do you mean to tell me," burst forth the elder man indignantly, "that you are going to leave her—them out, on an occasion like this? when your mother is coming down to do the honours for you?"

Jack stood filling his pipe afresh from the tobacco-jar, pressing it down with his little finger into the bowl, he did not look up.

"That is the very reason, my dear fellow, why I do not invite the Miss Durhams. I do not wish Lady Mary to meet them."

"Good God, Jack!" burst forth Lance, hotly, "do you mean, then, to tell me that you are *ashamed* of her? Ashamed to introduce to your mother that girl, who is an angel of goodness, and is as perfect a lady as any duchess in the land——"

"My dear Lance!" Jack lifted his eyes in utter amazement; he was quite calm in the face of this singular and unlooked for outburst of excitement, only that certainly he was paler than usual, "I really do not understand you," he added a little coldly.

Lance turned away roughly and stood with his hands upon the writing table and his back to his friend. There was a little pause; he seemed to be struggling with his agitation.

"I—I beg your pardon, Jack, if I am wronging you, but if it were possible that you were ashamed to introduce that young lady to Lady Mary and her smart London friends——"

"My dear fellow, there can be no possible question of 'shame' concerning Miss Madge Durham," said Jack quickly, and with a cold resentful hauteur, which carried conviction with it.

Lance sank down into his chair, and took up his pen again.

"I beg your pardon, Jack," he said once more.

Ludlow was silent for a few moments, presently he remarked with a certain effort:

"I have my reasons for not inviting the Miss Durhams to the picnic. I am not able to enter into them to you, but they are not in the very least what you seem to have imagined." Then after another brief silence, during which he drew one or two long puffs at his pipe, went back to his armchair and picked up the fallen sheets of *The Globe*, he added in his usual cheery manner: "I think we'd better go down to the farm to-morrow morning, and enquire about poultry, my mother writes that I am to provide cold chickens, and Antonio says he will want three couple."

So the Miss Durhams received no invitation to Mr. Ludlow's water party. They heard of it nevertheless, indeed it would have been difficult to avoid hearing of it, for the village of Fairley was full of it. How a large party of smart London ladies and gentlemen were coming down from town "to eat their dinner aboard o' that there barge," that was the way the Fairleyites put it, how "the gents was a scouring the country for chickens and vegetables, and fruit, and butter," and how the three flies from the village inn had been ordered to convey the gay company "that there little step of a way" backwards and forwards between the station and the river. All this was a matter of daily and open discussion amongst the good folks on Fairley Green, the monotony of whose sleeping existence was seldom broken into by such doings.

Even old Miss Durham heard of it and frowned heavily as she realized that the givers of the entertainment must be those identical "river gents," who had vexed her soul by appearing two Sundays ago in Fairley Church, and who had still further aroused her suspicions by their conspicuous conduct on the night of the fire, which conduct she attributed to the most unworthy motives.

"Keep Madge out of the way of this picnic party," she said privately to Miss Margaret. "I wish those young men would go. They are after no good, Margaret. I am convinced they are trying to scrape acquaintance with Madge."

"Oh, my dearest Aunt!" faltered the poor lady tremblingly—if only the old lady knew!

"Yes, I am not blind, my dear. Why did they go to church that once, and never again, pray? Why, but to look at Madge of course! Why, again, did they push themselves forward when the farm was on fire, rushing into the flames and doing all sorts of unnecessary things which it was the firemen's place to do, in order to make themselves remarkable, if it was not to attract Madge's attention when she was so silly as to run out of her bed at night to go and look on?"

"Gates says one of them saved little Emmy's life, aunt."

"Stuff and nonsense ! Little Emmy would have been saved, anyhow, by the firemen who saved the others. My dear, I can see through a stone wall as far as most people ! Those men are after no good, I tell you. Keep Madge under your own eyes as long as they remain in the neighbourhood."

Miss Margaret trembled anew. A guilty consciousness caused her to hang her head in silence. What would Aunt Durham say, if she ever came to find out that she and Madge had actually spent a couple of hours on board the boat belonging to these depredating animals ? And what, too, about other things to which Miss Margaret had weakly shut her eyes ? Who knew better than she did, that Madge went out by herself on the river regularly every afternoon, whilst she herself carefully directed her steps towards the village or the hills so that she might not be called upon to notice whether Madge sculled her boat up stream, or down stream ?

Had she not, too, seen on more than one occasion since the night of the fire, her niece carrying a little covered basket or a bunch of roses down towards the boat-house, and had she not had optical evidence that the basket returned empty and that the roses never came back at all ?

Miss Margaret knew that she was guilty of a great sin in shutting her eyes to these things, but like other sinners in this world, she made many excuses both for herself and for the sin which she condoned.

"After all," reasoned the soft-hearted soul within herself, "it is not as if Madge had asked my advice or confided her doings to me. Then my conscience would have compelled me to speak. But as it is, I know nothing ! It is just as likely that she goes down to the farm every day to ask after the Gates' children. I have no proof that she goes up to the house-boat. I have never seen her. And, after all, even if she did go there, it will do no great harm. They will soon be gone. But for that poor young man's scorched arm they would have doubtless gone before. Madge is very young. It must be good for her to have companions of her own age. They cannot hurt her, for, of course, a chance acquaintanceship of this kind is not likely to ripen into anything serious, and Madge is too well brought-up to think of flying in Aunt Durham's face for the sake of any young man. I think I will shut my eyes and let her have her little pleasure, poor child ! In after life," added the gentle middle-aged lady with a sigh, "she may be glad to look back upon these little memories of a happy summer ! " And then Aunt Margaret fell a-thinking of her own little dead and gone romance, and a thrill of sympathy shot through her at the recollection.

"But she must not suffer," she added to herself a little nervously. "I must not let her care too much. She is quite safe now. She cannot have learnt to care yet."

Ah, poor, foolish, ignorant old Aunt Margaret!

All the same she wondered with a little eagerness whether the young men would ask her niece and herself to their picnic.

Madge was crooning an old tune to herself at the piano that Tuesday evening. The moon was up and the warm night air fluttered in at the open window. Old Aunt Durham, spectacles on nose, was reading by the lamp-light out of an old calf-bound, dusty volume. It was entitled, "Ye Historie of ye Illustrious Familie of ye Faremeedes, of Faremeede Hall." It had been written by an ancestor, and the famous prophecy concerning the three maids was contained therein.

Old Miss Durham studied that book every night of her life.

Miss Margaret crept close up to Madge.

"Madge, dear," in a cautious whisper, "go on playing."

"Yes, Aunt." Her fingers wandered over the keys.

"Have you heard anything about that picnic on Thursday?"

"I have heard a great deal about it," in a little hard voice.

"Madge, dear, have they—are we—asked to it?"

"No, Aunt."

"Oh!" in a tone of disappointment. Aunt Margaret would have liked to go that picnic.

"What shall you do, then, Madge, on Thursday?" she enquired presently.

"I shall order Prince and go for a long ride over the hills by myself," answered Madge with decision; and then she got up and closed the piano and began putting the music books in order.

"They might invite us yet, you know," hazarded Aunt Margaret, whose soul was secretly possessed with ignoble hankerings after the chickens and the jellies and the lobster salads, which her imagination had conjured up, no less than for a glimpse of "the smart London people" whom she longed to behold.

"I should not certainly think of going, even if they should ask us, aunt. To be invited at the last moment would be no compliment at all." And the toss of her little square chin with which Madge accompanied this remark betrayed for the first time the soreness which she felt at the omission on the part of her friends.

CHAPTER IX.

A WATER PARTY.

“ . . . the dismal rain
Came down in slanting lines.”

—ALEX. SMITH.

IT is the poet Burns, who, embodying in his own quaint language an immortal and imperishable truth, tells us that :

“ The best laid schemes of mice and men
Gang aft a-gley.”

And the bitter lesson which he teaches concerning that “grief and pain” which too frequently take the place of the “promised joy” is one which most of us are frequently called upon to experience.

Lady Mary Ludlow, for instance, had abundant cause for reflection and meditation upon this great and unanswerable problem of life on the long looked-for day of her son’s water party.

For of what avail was it that hampers of good things had been duly ordered and punctually despatched to Paddington Station by that talented and excellent firm in Piccadilly of whom previous mention has been made ; of what consolation were raised pies, and galantines, stuffed quails, and truffled cutlets, to a mind harrowed by cruel anxieties of a totally different nature ? Of what use, in short, was it that after all had been so carefully prepared for success, ruin and failure from a simple and absolutely unexpected quarter should have remorselessly stared her in the face ?

At 9.40 the party of invited guests had assembled with praiseworthy punctuality upon the platform. The gentlemen in white flannels and straw hats, the ladies in every variety of diaphanous summer costume, in beautiful beflowered and beribboned hats, and armed with large scarlet or snow-white sunshades, gaily decked with laces and coloured knots. All were filled with glad expectations of enjoyment and eager for pleasure, and nothing was to be heard save merriment and laughter.

Alas for the futility of human hopes !

At precisely 9.45, as the train bearing the two saloon carriages full of Jack’s guests, steamed slowly forth out of the Great Western terminus, there commenced to descend from the pitiless heavens, a still, small, but absolutely relentless drizzle !

For weeks past the weather had been so splendid and the

summer skies so blue, that nobody had so much as given a thought to the possibility of a change, for it is a singular thing that in spite of the mutability of the English climate, there never was a fine day upon which the human heart does not nourish a secret persuasion that fine days are going to last for ever, nor yet a wet one that we are not despondingly certain that it will never be fair weather again !

So although there had been no sunshine that morning, and the glass was perceptibly falling, they had said to one another as they left their homes :

“Grey mornings are always the finest in the end. It is sure to be very hot by noon. By and bye it will be a lovely day.”

And so, regardless of their doom, they brought in their hands neither mackintoshes, nor ulsters, nor umbrellas. Only little summer wraps of lace and plush, and all those lovely long-handled sunshades of radiant colours and delicate fabric !

And meanwhile the drizzle went on and on, remorselessly and unceasingly, beating against the windows of the rushing train, and blotting out all the sweet summer landscape into one uniform haze of mist and vapour. And poor Lady Mary’s heart went down, down, down—right into the very soles of her well-varnished little patent-leather shoes !

Of all the manifold conditions of human misery that can be conceived, there is perhaps not one that can, for discomfort and mental depression, be compared to a picnic party on the Thames on a wet day. Those only who have lived through this dreadful experience can wholly realize the full depths of the cup of wretchedness, which through the long, dreary hours, it becomes their portion to drain.

The hoping against hope during the earlier hours of the day, succeeded by the gradual deepening of gloom upon the soul as hope grows less and despair increases ; the fitful fever of those moments when a transient lifting of the clouds, or a brief interval in the heavy downpour, awakens us once again to vain delusions in the forlorn hopelessness of a lost cause ; and above all the physical misery which deepens ever more and more ; the soaking wet without, the shivering chill within, the ruined raiment, the blighted expectations ! Who that has experienced these things, does not recall with strong shudderings all the unspeakable horror of them ?

Lady Mary Ludlow’s picnic on the Thames—for it was in truth more hers than her son’s—was, owing to these melancholy reasons, a failure from beginning to end.

When the party got out at Fairley Station the rain was coming down in torrents, the ladies got wet in running to the covered vehicles which awaited them, and still more wet in

being conveyed in batches from the towing-path to the *Naiad* in the punt. Once on board they were indeed able to take shelter in the saloon, where there was nothing on earth to do but to sit still and wait until luncheon was ready.

With a view to instilling a little more hilarity into the dismalness of affairs, Jack and Lance, ably assisted by Antonio, did their best to hurry on the lunch as quickly as possible, and for a short space of time, sustained by the hearty consumption of sundry good things and enlivened by the cheerful poppings of many champagne corks, the unhappy victims of fate did manage to cheat their souls into the belief that they were enjoying themselves.

They ate and they drank, and they made jokes ; and they turned their backs upon the pitiless downpour, until they almost forgot that it was raining. Just as they were finishing lunch, too, the clouds lifted a little—several sanguine voices cried out hopefully that it was going to clear, whilst one young woman, braver and rasher than the rest, actually ventured forth, accompanied by an attendant swain, in one of the wet and sodden boats.

But, just as three o'clock struck from Fairley Church clock, the rent masses of cloud lumbered up again, and on came the rain, heavier and harder than ever. The trees upon the wooded hill-side streamed down rivulets of water, the rain-drops splashed into veritable spray upon the river ; in the meadows beyond the towing-path the cattle stood under the trees, with hanging heads and feeble knees, the very picture of abject misery and resignation, whilst a grey mist shrouded the face of the whole land in a winding sheet of impenetrable fog.

Hope spread her wings and fled from the desolate scene, whilst Despair settled down in grim earnest upon the bosoms of the unfortunate pleasure-seekers.

Everybody resigned themselves to the worst, and the venturesome young lady, who had flown in the face of Providence by starting off in the boat, came back again, drenched to the skin, a sadder and, perchance, a wiser woman.

After that there was only one thing left to wish for—the 6.20 return train to Town. Having missed the 2.45 owing to the luncheon hour, there was nothing to take them home again until twenty minutes past six. And those same damsels who in the early morning had pleaded that they might be allowed to prolong their sylvan pleasures until the very last train, now frequently looked at their watches, and sighed deeply as they longed for the speedier flight of the lagging moments.

The worst of it all for poor Lady Mary was that not only from a social point of view was the day a *coup manqué*, but,

also still more so from that private and personal aspect which had caused her to originate and inaugurate the whole expedition.

Jack and Agnes were brought no nearer together by it than if the one had been left undisturbed in his solitude in Fairley Reach and the other had remained in Hans Place.

Agnes, in point of fact, was in a very bad temper. She had not wanted to come in the first instance, and having been obliged to do so, the untoward circumstances of the day made her infinitely regret that she had done so. Moreover, a delicious and perfectly new toilette of palest pink foulard silk, put on to-day for the first time, was utterly and entirely ruined, as also was a sailor hat with pale pink rosebuds and ribbons to match, and ditto a parasol that had resembled, at starting, a snow-drift of soft lace frillings, but which now was an unwholesome-looking pulp of dirty white, streaked here and there, like mottled soap, with pink streaks from the sodden ribbons which had once so crisply adorned it.

These things are sore trials even to the noblest amongst women—but to Agnes Verinder, who cared more about her clothes and her appearance than she did perhaps about anything else on earth, the trial was simply unendurable. To be made to look ridiculous, to the woman who was accustomed to be worshipped as a beauty, was the hardest thing on earth to bear.

When she jumped off the punt on to the house-boat on arriving, she scarcely uttered even a conventional greeting to Jack, but rushed into the shelter of the saloon in a perfect agony of rage and disgust, and having shaken out her wet skirts as well as she could, she subsided into the far corner, behind the long lunch-table which filled up the whole of the small room and announced her determination of not stirring again until it was time to go home.

And to this determination she religiously adhered. In vain did Lady Mary beckon to her to come out of her entrenchment into the less cramped regions near the doorway, and equally in vain did she commission Jack to induce her to change her place.

“I am very comfortable here, thanks,” she replied, “I shall only get the drippings from the awning there—I don’t intend to move till we go home.”

And she did not. One of the men who had come down from London with her took up his position beside her in her corner, and he too declined to alter his place at the hints and suggestions of his host’s mother, and such conversation as Agnes indulged in was carried on with this gentleman.

Truth to say, he bored her very much—in fact an angel from Heaven would have bored her to-day—and she scarcely

took the trouble to conceal the portentous yawnings with which her handsome face became frequently distorted.

So, instead of those breakings up of the party into couples, of which poor Lady Mary had dreamed—of those wanderings *à deux* in leafy places, and sweet, lazy *tête-à-têtes* upon the bosom of the gliding stream—there came about nothing at all save a monotonous cooping up of the whole party in a space far too small to hold them properly, where everybody got hot and cross, and nobody sat next to the right person, whilst the pitiless rain beat unceasingly against the window-panes.

A little diversion indeed was created when, in the face of great difficulties, the temporary table that had been rigged up for luncheon was laboriously taken to pieces and the remains of the feast cleared away. Then Jack was able to get to the piano, and sang a dreamy love-song in his fine melodious voice, whilst another gentleman who had brought down a banjo from Town volunteered a couple of nigger ditties, to which everybody sang chorus—everybody, that is to say, excepting Agnes. Miss Verinder did not like music, and made no secret of the weariness which it caused her. She talked and she yawned all the time the song was going on.

“If ever I marry Jack Ludlow,” she said to herself, “as I may perhaps find it convenient to do some day, the very first thing I shall put a stop to is that music. A man looks such a fool, sitting at the piano singing sentiment—and it entirely destroys conversation too !”

Then came five o'clock tea, and the spirits of the imprisoned guests began to rise because the hour of their deliverance was undoubtedly drawing near. And it was with positive joy, which no amount of politeness could effectually disguise, that the melancholy procession of three close flys, coming one after the other along the towing-path, was at length descried in the distance.

Long before there was the least occasion to start, the ladies were ready and eager to be off, and the good-byes had begun to be spoken.

“It has been wretched !” said Lady Mary as she stood apart for a moment by the side of her son, whilst Lance was punting the first load across to the shore ; “I will never arrange another water-party again as long as I live ! and I don't believe that you and Agnes have so much as spoken a dozen words to each other all day. See, she is standing alone just now—go and say something to her, Jack.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Is there any occasion, little mother ? She does not seem to desire my society.”

“How is a girl to evince a preference for a man who does not speak to her, pray ? Surely, Jack, you must admire her ? she has grown far more beautiful than when you were last at

home. Two London seasons have developed her amazingly—don't you think so?"

Jack looked at the large handsome woman critically.

She was leaning against the doorway of the saloon—her arm raised against the portière curtain, her chin thrown up, her great sombre eyes fixed upon the returning punt. Her attitude was fine—she might have stood for her picture as she was standing now.

"Yes, she is certainly beautiful," said Jack, with a certain grudging admiration, and then, in order to please his mother, he stepped across and spoke to her.

"I am afraid you've had a very miserable day, Miss Verinder."

The words were commonplace enough, but, as Agnes turned and met the clear brown eyes and smiling face of her old friend, it struck her suddenly that he had outgrown during the past year much of the boyish rawness which she remembered in him.

"It was so good of you to come, and I dare not, in the face of such a failure as the weather clerk has made of it, ask you to venture down to Fairley another day."

"Well," she answered with a laugh. "It has certainly not been very successful, although you did all you could to mitigate our disappointment, Mr. Ludlow."

In their childhood they had called each other Jack and Agnes, but now instinctively they fell back upon a more formal mode of address.

"You have been bored?" said Jack, looking at her with so frank a smile that she answered him back with unexpected candour."

"Horribly, I own it. But then my clothes are spoilt—and besides most things bore me."

"Even Jack Ludlow?" he suggested laughingly.

She shook her head—threw him a glance half of coquetry half of awakening interest.

"You have never yet given me the chance!"

The great slumbrous eyes that met his were full of a dull fire. Something in their depths seemed to stir the young man's blood, making havoc within him of all that his better nature held sacred.

"Is it too late?" he murmured.

"You can always try," she replied in the same tone.

He had not intended to go up to the station and see the party off, but somehow after that speech he went.

She experienced a faint excitement. It delighted her to play these pranks upon men; to lead them on in order to make fools of them. It cost her so little! A word, a smile, a bewildering glance from the beautiful eyes, and the thing was done!

It occurred to her suddenly that she might as well befool Jack Ludlow as any other man—it was a game that it amused her to play at—she had driven so many half mad at it and she never injured herself in the playing. She was so cold, and so hard, and so selfish, that nothing ever hurt her. Why do good people tell us that it is not right to be cold and hard and selfish? Do not the women who are so, have the best time of it in this world? Do they not enjoy all the fun and incur none of the danger? And as for those softer souls that beat themselves to death against the hard rocks of self-sacrifice and love—do not they break their hearts in vain, and is there anyone to commend them? save here and there a few to give them at best a contemptuous pity for their folly?

Agnes Verinder, secure in the entrenchments of her own unassailable self-possession, played at spoiling the lives of the men whom her great beauty attracted with fatal ease. Shallow-hearted, and shallow-brained—do not the two often go together?—she loved no one so well as herself, valued no good thing on earth so much as dress and success.

Of what avail is it that such a woman is as chaste as Diana, and as pure as a Vestal virgin? Shall it not nevertheless be said of her whose womanhood is exercised for evil and not for good upon the men who come under her influence, that she is in very truth, in no sense of the word a “good woman?”

The ease with which Miss Verinder carried on her little unholy amusements was one of the most singular things about it. She was not at all clever in conversation, she had no power of repartee, no originality of observation—indolent by nature and inclination, it was never necessary for her to make any great exertion to win her game. Her glorious beauty, her wonderful mysterious eyes, her brilliant smile—did it all for her with very little trouble in an incredibly short time. To such a woman beauty is indeed a curse.

Almost as soon as the idea came into her mind that a man was worth her while to capture, her conquest over him became complete.

So through her empty selfish brain the thought ran quickly, as she leant against the saloon door of the *Naiad* and watched the punt that was returning to take her away gliding swiftly across the stream, that it would be worth her while to make Jack Ludlow worship her—it was a good reserve card for her to play.

She met his eyes and she found that there was something in their clear brown depths—so like Lady Mary's—which attracted her.

“He has improved,” she thought. “A year has made a difference in him, perhaps he has learnt to love some rustic maid—if so, how pleasant it would be to dispossess her! He

does not look quite the 'good boy' of old days—he has tasted of life—and life has matured him. In case I find it convenient to marry him, I may as well make him fall in love with me—I can but throw him over if I get tired of him."

So she looked her wicked look, half passion, half coquetry, and smiled as sirens only understand how to smile—and doubtless had Jack been quite heart whole he would have fallen prone, as many another better and wiser man had done, before her.

But there was something in the background of which Miss Verinder knew nothing. He did not fall, only very decidedly he was shaken. He went with her up to the station.

She was very gracious to him—afterwards he realised that he had even promised to go up to Town to go to a ball with her, and that she had also asked him to come and help her with a stall she was going to hold at a bazaar in the Albert Hall—poor Jack, to whom balls and bazaars were but other names for Pandemonium!

Lady Mary, meanwhile, watched these parting moments with a breathless anxiety—after all perhaps some way had been made, and the foundation possibly laid for a better understanding between the young people.

Lady Mary knew nothing about Agnes' life and character. "Mrs. George," who knew so much, was a discreet woman—it was not for her to ruin the chances of her brother-in-law's child by injudicious revelations. Lady Mary only saw in Agnes, Sir Herbert's heiress, and a remarkably handsome young lady—who had nice manners and always spoke prettily to herself.

"If only it had been a fine day what might not have been accomplished!" sighed the tired little lady to herself as she threw herself not unthankfully against the cushions of the railway carriage, "but I ought not to complain—these things are in the hands of the Almighty."

And whether she meant the weather or the marriage by her pious aspiration, is perhaps what she herself could not have justly stated.

Jack turned away from the station with that uneasy sensation of dissatisfaction in his heart which comes to us when we have done or said something against which our better self revolts.

He walked on down the muddy road with his hands in his pockets and his eyes on the ground—there was an oppressive sense of disgust upon him—he loathed himself.

The rain, with that perversity which rain usually displays, now, that it was of no further importance whether it stopped or went on, had suddenly entirely ceased—and not only that, but upon the western sky the clouds were simultaneously rent

asunder, and the red level rays of the sinking sun illumined the landscape from end to end with a ruddy glory. The dripping leaves glittered in the light—the meadows sparkled with myriads of diamond shafted crystals, whilst the birds who all day long had been hushed and silent as the grave, broke forth on every side into a very jubilee of song. Then all at once he heard the footsteps of a horse splashing evenly through the mud, coming nearer and nearer along the lane. Jack lifted his head with a quick, eager movement, and saw a young lady on a bay pony riding slowly towards him.

The golden light enfolded her with its radiance—the heavy bank of cloud seemed to have parted but to make way for her—Jack drew a long breath. Here indeed was sunshine after storm !

Madge Durham after Agnes Verinder !

CHAPTER X.

“ ALL IN THE GOLDEN EVENING.”

“ Love took up the harp of Life and smote on all the chords with might,
Smote the chord of Self, that trembling, passed in music out of sight.”

—TENNYSON.

MADGE had been kept indoors all day by the rain. She had had plenty of time to think about that picnic to which she had not been invited.

All things considered she could not exactly regret that she had not been present at it, for even the great dull house was a more comfortable place to be in on a wet day, than a house-boat moored in mid-stream. But then the gravamen lay—not in her not having gone to her friend’s picnic party—but in her not having been asked to it !

Some details of the visitors and their proceedings had permeated to the ears of the young lady at the Hall during the course of the day. Emmy Gates had brought up a message from the farm from her mother, and Madge had spoken to her at the back door. Emmy had been up at the station when the London ladies had arrived, and reported that there was among them a tall lady who was most astonishingly beautiful, all dressed in pink silk, and with eyes as large and bright as lanterns. Then too, Mr. Ludlow’s mother was there—the porter thought she was Mr. Parker’s mother—but Mr. Green, the station-master had stated authoritatively he heard Mr. Ludlow call her “ mother,” so of course that settled the question.

Madge was deeply interested. The description of the beautiful tall lady filled her with a vague uneasiness ; but she

drank in eagerly all that the little maid could tell her about Mr. Ludlow's mother.

As the day wore on, she began to feel sorry for those beautifully-dressed ladies who had come all the way from London for a day in the country, and was vexed too that they should not be able to carry away a better impression of the beauties of Fairley.

Then, when the rain had all but stopped, she told her aunts that she would go out for half-an-hour's ride before dinner, and by the time Prince came round to the door, the rain was over, and she jumped into the saddle and started off across the Park at a brisk canter.

Presently out came the setting sun, and the country maiden drew her little steed in to a walk, as she turned into the road and sniffed up the sweet fresh scent of trees and earth, with a delighted sense of freedom and renewed energy.

Then she saw the white trail of the smoke across the valley as it caught the gleam of the evening sunshine—it was the 6.20 up train.

"They are gone!" said Madge to herself, and although she could not have told why, she experienced a distinct sense of relief at the thought.

By the time she saw Jack coming towards her along the wet road, her spirits had risen so much that all sense of resentment against him had vanished.

"Your friends have gone?" she said to him by way of an opening to the conversation as he lifted his hat to her.

"Yes, it has been a terrible day." He drew a long breath and looked up into her face. The candid eyes looked down in a friendly manner into his. There were no mysteries, no subtle enigmas in their transparent glances. Instinctively Jack felt that the atmosphere of this influence was purer, sweeter, more wholesome, and that all that was evil and baleful had been carried away with that swift vanishing trail of white smoke upon the horizon.

"I am so sorry," said Madge simply, alluding to the misfortune of the weather.

Jack had turned, and was walking beside her with his hand on the pony's mane.

"Mrs. Ludlow was with the party, was she not?—your mother I mean?"

He had looked up in surprise for a moment at the unfamiliar name, then something, he knew not what, made him accept her error without a comment.

"Yes, my mother came with them," he replied.

Ah, what a little mistake it was, to have made such havoc 'n the days that were to come!

"I do not want her to know who my relations are," he

thought ; "since she has not been told, I would rather that she remained in ignorance. If I can win her love, let her love me for myself, and not for my expectations," so he held his tongue and said nothing.

They crossed the stone bridge over the river, below Fairley Lock, and began to walk up the wooded hillside beyond it. Madge accepted his companionship simply and in silence. She was very happy, but she scarcely knew why or wherefore.

They reached the summit of the hill—beneath them like a map lay the wide stretch of green country ; fields, villages, woods, with the river winding like molten gold amongst them. The land was bathed in a tender golden radiance. The dark curtain of the storm had rolled away to the east, the western sky was aflame. Crimson and orange tinted clouds hung in a glittering circle upon the track of the dying day, whilst the great sun, like a globe of fire, sank slowly and majestically to his rest behind a distant ridge of hill.

It was a landscape after Cuyp.

For a moment or two neither of them spoke.

All at once Jack turned and their eyes met. Suddenly he had made up his mind. He took her little gloved hand in his, and held it fast.

"Madge," he murmured tremulously, speaking all at once out of the fullness of his heart, "Madge, I love you."

There was no answer, only she trembled, and her eyelids sank.

"Darling, I cannot live without you, it has been such a long day, but now the golden evening is here and my sunshine has come back to me. Madge you are my good angel ? I want you for my own, my very own—tell me that you love me, sweetheart ?"

He had read the love in her eyes, in the light of the level sunshine that illumined her down-bent face.

Love was such a new thing to her. It was all strange and wonderful and passing sweet. Something there was that had crept into her heart unawares, and she had not understood it ; but now he himself had given it a name—and she knew !

"Yes—I love you," she answered him simply.

"My dear one ! and you will be my own ? my wife ?" he cried rapturously, trying to clasp the slender form in his happy arms.

But Madge drew back startled and alarmed.

"Oh, no, no—not that ! You know I cannot marry ! Have I not told you that I can never marry ? Perhaps I have done wrong to care—to love you—but if it is wrong I cannot help it—it has come to me. I did not understand it till you spoke—but oh, no, I cannot be your wife, Mr. Ludlow."

"But my dearest, this is sheer madness! it is impossible that this old woman and her fables can keep us apart. You have met me, and you love me, and now nothing can ever divide us!"

She looked infinitely troubled—the tears stood in her blue eyes.

"I have done very wrong," she murmured brokenly. "I owe them everything. I was a beggar and they made me their child, and trusted me. You must forget me and go away, there is nothing else to be done."

But Jack Ludlow laughed aloud. A lover whose mistress has confessed her love to him fears nothing. For all answer he lifted her light form from the saddle and held her to his heart, and took from her sweet, shrinking lips the kisses which he coveted.

"To-morrow," he cried gaily, "I will go and beard this old dragon who keeps you, in her den, and I will tell her that you are mine, mine, mine! Not all the old women in Christendom shall take you from me! We shall see then which shall win the day!"

"Oh, no, you must not go and see her, not yet at least, you do not know Aunt Durham—she is terrible when she is angry."

"I shall brave her anger."

"She will turn me out of doors."

"Then you will come to me all the sooner."

"But where should I go?"

"To my mother, she will stand by us."

He said it boldly, but for the first time a misgiving crossed his mind. Would Lady Mary indeed sanction or abet any such thing? Jack knew very well that she would not. If Madge were turned adrift portionless and penniless, Lady Mary was not at all likely to receive her with open arms, or to welcome her as a daughter-in law.

Nevertheless, the strength of his love, and the fervour of his own pleadings carried conviction to his own heart, and in the end to hers as well. Jack was perfectly certain that he had but to call upon old Miss Durham—to inform her of the foolishness of the old prophecy concerning the three maids of Fairmead, and to assure her of his own fixed resolve to transform the third damsel of the fated trio into his own wife—in order to induce her to give up all opposition to her great-niece's marriage.

It seemed to him impossible that any reasonable human being should resist his arguments. Besides, Jack was a popular person, old ladies had always been fond of him, and his pleasant face and cheery manners had never yet failed to ingratiate him with them. Why should this old lady be harder-hearted to him than all other old ladies?

So they sauntered slowly down the hill, hand in hand, whilst Prince followed patiently behind them, and Madge listened as he talked, and caught in a great measure the spirit of his sanguine expectations.

Jack was so clever and so good, he must surely know best ! Perhaps indeed Aunt Durham would feel inclined to listen to him, perhaps when it came to the point, she would relent in her bad opinion of men and her abhorrence of the marriage state, perhaps she would take a fancy to Jack's handsome face and realize that whatever other men might be, this one at least was good and true and trustworthy—perhaps, perhaps !

And so they parted, full of hope and happiness, with the golden morrow dancing before their enchanted eyes in the halo of the golden evening. At the bend of the lane Jack lifted his little love on to her saddle, whispering tenderly as he pressed his lips to the white wrist above her glove :

“To-morrow at eleven o'clock then, I shall come to the Hall. Courage, my dearest, all will be well !”

And then she cantered away homewards, and the sun sank suddenly and the air grew dim and chill ; and he stood still and watched her swift-vanishing figure swaying to the motion of her pony, till at last he could scarcely distinguish the outlines of her face as she turned back to wave him a farewell before the turn of the lane carried her out of his sight amongst the gathering twilight shadows.

“To-morrow !” What an easy word it is to say ! how much it brings to us of hope and happiness, how satisfactorily we map out its hours for our own benefit and advantage, how little we doubt that they will become our very own to use as we will for our plans and pleasures. And yet this same “To-morrow” from which we expect so much, turns out too often but a sorry jade who tricks us into misfortune, and mocks at all our fondest anticipations.

When Jack awoke in the morning, it was with a vague delicious feeling of great and wonderful gladness that he first opened his eyes—of something that had happened that was good and glorious, and of something important that was still to be done.

He sprung eagerly up from his narrow couch ; he was in haste to begin the day that was to complete his happiness. The sun was already high in the heavens. The weather was perfect—after the rain of yesterday the freshness of the lovely earth was a beautiful thing to contemplate. Every flower seemed to blossom forth anew, every bird to shout his song louder and fuller, every waving branch to flutter more joyfully in the cooler breezes.

Jack's morning swim in the river was the most invigorating thing in the world.

"Thank God," he said aloud, when at last he was dressed and issued forth from his cabin, "that picnic is over! Yesterday was a nightmare; to-day we live again!"

"I am with you, my boy!" cried Lance, who overheard him. "No more water-parties on this ship, please, or yours truly will not survive to tell the tale. What a horrible experience it was! Hurrah for old clothes and pipes and comfort, and not a petticoat within hail! All the same, that Miss Verinder, Jack, is a deuced fine woman, never saw a handsomer woman in my life!"

"Oh, bother Miss Verinder!" cried Jack, with a slight frown, and secretly to himself he added, "I have done with Agnes Verinder now, thank goodness! She is the kind of woman who would drag one down. Thank God, my darling has saved me from that danger for ever!"

They sat down to breakfast together in the best of spirits; it was half-past nine.

Naturally, it had not occurred to Jack to take Lance into his confidence; he informed him, however, that he had important business in the neighbourhood which would take him on shore—he did not specify in what direction—soon after eleven o'clock.

"All right, old chap. Then I'll wait, and read the papers till you come back."

"Don't wait if you want to be off anywhere," said Jack.

At that moment a shrill voice rang through the fresh morning air.

"*Nai—a-a-d* ahoy!"

Jack jumped up and looked out.

A small boy stood on the towing path waving something of a dusky orange colour in his hand.

"Please, sir, a tallygrum!"

"All right, jump into the dinghy, Antonio, and fetch it."

Jack stood awaiting the boat's return. He filled his pipe leisurely and lit it. He looked up stream and down stream, no painful anticipations of any kind occupied his mind—the telegram did not excite him. Telegrams in this latter generation have passed into ordinary incidents of daily life.

"She is for you, signor," said Antonio, handing it up to his master.

Jack opened the envelope leisurely.

The message was from his uncle.

"Accident to your father. Feared serious. Come home at once."

It seemed as though he read it over a great many times. The words danced before his eyes. He put up his hand to his head in a dazed way.

"What is it, Jack?" said Lance, behind him.

Jack put the paper silently into his hand.

Lance looked very grave.

"You must go at once."

"I suppose so."

"You will catch the 10. 30 if you look sharp," consulting his watch. "Here, Antonio, bring the dinghy round again, and pack Mr. Ludlow's things at once. The small portmanteau will do, won't it, Jack? and your dressing-bag? Don't you bother, old fellow. I'll do it all. I can find your things. Look sharp, Antonio!"

"Coming sare."

Jack stood stock still. He looked bewildered, confused—stunned, almost. Lance glanced at him, and then looked quickly away.

"Poor old Jack," he thought, pityingly. "How awfully upset he looks! I suppose he was very fond of his father. I think a man never understands how much he loves his father till he loses him. I expect the poor chap is going to die, or Lord Castlemere wouldn't have wired like that."

He busied himself with his friend's packing, stuffing the bottles and brushes himself into the dressing bag.

"Oh, Lance, how good of you!" said Jack, at last coming forward with evident effort. "Shall I catch the 10. 30 do you think?" he added slowly, and then he put his hand up again to his head in that same vague, undecided manner, whilst wildly through his brain there surged a whole multitude of maddening thoughts.

What was he to do about Madge? How was he to let her know? Dare he send a note up to the Hall? Out of the question! It might be intercepted. Should he write to her by post? Still the same difficulty, the letter bag was always brought to Miss Durham to open, Madge had told him so. Should he confide in Lance? Oh, no! that was more impossible than all.

"Make haste and change your clothes," said Lance, at last, taking him by the arm, and almost pushing him into his cabin. "You really must you know, Jack, or you will lose the train."

"What if I waited till the 12. 40?" muttered Jack.

Lance stared at him in blank amazement.

"Wait till 12. 40 in a case of life and death? Great Heavens, Jack! what for? Besides, you have heaps of time if you will only make haste. I am going up to the station to see you off."

Privately, Lance did not consider that it was safe to leave him until he was in the train; his manner was so odd and strange.

Just as Jack was getting into the train, he turned back.

"Lance, if there should come any message—I mean if anybody should enquire for me—if anybody comes—will you be sure and say why I had to go, and that I shall be back as soon as possible?"

"Yes, yes, of course, old fellow. Jump in."

Lance had scarcely listened to this parting injunction, and certainly had not the least idea what Jack meant by it. The guard slammed to the door, and the train moved off; and Mr. Parker went back slowly to his solitary quarters on the *Naiad*.

Somehow the *Naiad* had lost half her charm without Jack. He began soon to feel very dull indeed. All was so silent, and so still—no cheery little chat over small domestic incidents, no merry whistle from the upper deck, no friendly whiff of smoke from a companion pipe.

"A river life, *alone*, would be insupportable!" said Mr. Parker to himself before half the morning was over. Jack and he often went their divers ways, but then they had always had each other to come back to.

He began to feel very sad indeed. The sunshine flickering on the water ceased to charm him. The tender beauties of the overhanging wooded banks ceased to soothe him. The joys of fishing no longer offered any temptation to him, and even the prospect of an excellent lunch held forth no anticipation of delight to his hungry soul.

At two o'clock came the second post. Several for Jack, and two for himself. One was a bill, the other an invitation from an old Oxford chum forwarded to him from Town.

"DEAR PARKER, our races are on this week. Do come down for them; they will be great fun, and they begin Monday next. Come down for Sunday if you can. I don't know where you are, but if this reaches you in time, never mind writing, but send me a wire, and come off at once."

"Hurrah!" cried Lance aloud, chucking his cap up in the air. "That will just about suit me to a T! What a piece of luck! To-day is Friday. I can get up to Town, to-night, and down to Leicestershire to-morrow morning. I'll be off by the 6. 20 train. Hi, Antonio, I am going away, too!"

"Yes, sare."

"Mr. Ludlow can't possibly get back before Tuesday or Wednesday, even if his father gets well, and I'll be back on Wednesday, for certain."

Lance was delighted. It was a piece of good fortune that he should receive this invitation at the present juncture, just as his depression was becoming intolerable. Nothing could have pleased him better.

By the 6. 20 he was off to Town, and then Antonio came

back, locked all the doors, fastened up all the shutters, and secured all the boats firmly together ; then, like the wise and clever fellow that he was, he packed a small bag for himself, and took the eight o'clock slow train to Oxford, and went off to spend his Sunday with a well-to-do little widow of his acquaintance there.

So by nightfall the *Naïad* was deserted.

CHAPTER XI.

FAMILY COUNCILS.

“ But strive still to be a man before your mother.”

—COWPER.

IN the long library at Castle Regis three people clad in deep mourning were gathered together with grave and solemn faces. They were Lord Castlemere, Lady Mary and Jack.

Colonel Ludlow was dead. He had been buried with his fathers in the Castle Regis vault, and it was the day after the funeral. Jack had not arrived in time to see his father alive. It had been a shocking accident. It was the old story of a newly-purchased horse, purchased without a character at an auction. The animal was handsome and showy-looking—to all appearance sound in wind and limb. There seemed to be no reason why he had only fetched such a very low figure at the sale, and if there was a screw loose anywhere, neither the colonel nor his head groom had been able to discover it.

“ They do say, colonel, as how 'e 'ave a temper,” suggested one of the stablemen who was hanging about the yard.

But Colonel Ludlow paid no attention to the warning and bought the horse.

The next day, intent on trying his new purchase, the colonel had him put into the dog-cart and went out for a drive by himself. The brute waited until he was well out of the park in the high road, then he laid his ears back and put his head down and proceeded to kick the trap to pieces. Colonel Ludlow was thrown violently out on to the road and the animal's heels came into contact with his skull.

He was carried home insensible, and never spoke again.

It was one of those horrible nightmares of life, which, though they happen again and again in the records of human affliction, never fail in every recurring instance, to bring a crushed sense of utter bewilderment upon the individuals who are called upon to bear the blow.

We read of these things almost daily in the newspapers. We sigh, we murmur a few words of sympathy and compassion, and then we go our way and forget them. Such horrors are in the world, no doubt, and occur every day—but that they can touch us—you, or me—yours, or mine—that is what seems to us to be beyond the range of the wildest possibility!

And then one day the blow falls. The cruel wheel of life that crushes some of us here and there, with such a remorseless impartiality, rolls at last our way, and we are spared no more than any other. Death in its most hideous form claims our dearest, and that strange sense of utter amazement, coupled with utter horror, wraps us for a time in a dark pall of blind and unreasoning rebellion.

The virtue of resignation! Preachers have enlarged upon it with sentimental effusion—poets have penned sweet-sounding rhymes in its honour—Christian moralists by the score have pointed to it with pardonable pride. But does it exist at all? Do we, any of us, honestly believe in it? Should we be “resigned,” forsooth, if we could alter our fate? If, by any sacrifice, any deed of heroism, any effort of our own, however desperate—however wicked, evn—we could bring back our dead from that silent land out of which they speak to us again, nevermore—nevermore?

Ah, no, I do not believe it. To those who have suffered and lost. “Resignation” is but another word for apathy—an apathy which springs, not from neatly-quoted Christian platitudes, but from the blank, raging hopelessness of human despair.

So poor little Lady Mary, dressed in that pathetic garb which brings a widow’s sorrow home to the heart of every living man and woman who looks upon it, sat by pale and mute and silent, with every spark of hope, and life, and brightness crushed out of her eager face, and with the endurance of a speechless despair in the very droop of her tired arms and aching head. Too worn to rebel, too weary even for tears.

The clergyman, good man, who had read the funeral service yesterday over her husband, and who had never in all his life lost any single thing which had effectually spoilt his appetite for dinner, had gone, as in duty bound, after all was over—after what he termed “the last sad rites” had been performed—to visit his widowed parishioner. Touched by her calm stillness, by the face lately so bright and mobile, now so pale and quiet, and by the sweet sad smile with which she had welcomed him, he had found himself unable, nevertheless, to say much to her in the way of ghostly consolation. Only on leaving her he had pressed her hand

and murmured a few words in eulogy of her beautiful and Christian resignation. Afterwards, he had spoken of her to others of his flock as a holy example of submission to the will of God.

He meant well, poor man, but then he had never gone through that mill that "grindeth very small" himself, and so he did not know.

But Lady Mary knew. She was not in the very least deceived as to her own spiritual condition. She knew perfectly well that she was neither submissive nor resigned. That if she had known how to alter the unalterable, she would have done it—that if it would have brought her lost one back, but for one single hour, she would have cried aloud and have blasphemed God, as the Prophet Job did before her—that she would have proclaimed her despair upon the housetops, and her sense of the cruel and unmerited fate of her beloved in the market-places.

But of what avail would it be? It was too late now to alter the unalterable, and so, one of that great company of earth's martyrs, whose cries are never heard, and to whose complaint Heaven listens not, she was silent. Only she was so tired—so tired and numb with the numbness of those who have no hope.

So she sat quiet and tearless in her brother-in-law's house, with one small hand fast locked in her son's and one laid listlessly down upon the crape upon her knees.

And Lord Castlemere, who had loved her all his life, loved her now in her sorrow and her loneliness fifty times better than he had ever loved her before.

There was something, too, of secret exultation within him as he watched her still pale face. Loyally as he had loved his brother, still that brother had always stood between them. Now there was nobody for her to turn to but himself. He was her natural protector, and to him it was but right that she should look for the guidance and support of the residue of her life.

He had already settled that she should live at Castle Regis, and to instal this sad, sorrowing woman as the mistress of his great empty house seemed to him to be the sweetest consolation that life had yet ever held out to him.

"Northerley had better be let," said Jack, to whom Northerley had been left by his father's will, and to whom his uncle had just imparted his mother's consent to remain at Castle Regis."

Lord Castlemere glanced at Lady Mary. Something on this subject had evidently been said already between them.

"I do not think that would be wise, dear," said the sweet,

gentle voice. "Northerley must be your home some day—at a time now not far off, we hope."

Jack looked straight before him. His colour rose a little. There was a brief silence.

Then his uncle spoke:

"Your dear mother is not only the best, but the wisest of women, my boy," he began, with a look of reverent tenderness towards the bent head in its white cap. "Even this crushing and awful sorrow has not been able to blind her to the importance of the future for you, who are now her only hope in life. We think, Jack, that now, more than ever, it would be the height of folly to postpone more than actually necessary an event which no one desired more ardently than did your dear father. Your marriage with Miss Verinder."

Jack started to his feet impatiently.

"Is this a time for marrying and giving in marriage?" he cried indignantly, "when my father was only buried yesterday!"

"There is never a time, Jack," replied his uncle quietly, "when to do one's duty according to one's station in life is unfitting."

"I cannot even think of marriage," said Jack hotly.

"Jack, dear, I think you *must* think a little about it," said the soft voice of his mother at his elbow. She had risen and had gone to his side. She laid her hand upon his coat sleeve, and her pleading face was a little tremulous. "You see it means so much—so very much to your uncle now. You are the only one—now—now—" her voice broke a little, and the sentence remained unfinished.

Jack drew his mother into his arms and pillow'd her tearful face upon his breast. All the manliness, all the tenderness of his nature were called into play by his attitude towards her. He was "the only son of his mother, and she was a widow." Sweet pathetic words! That from the world's foundation until its close, shall never cease to stir the heart with a holy compassion for that sad and simple story that is for ever repeating itself in the lives of men and women.

To see the mother and son thus clasped silently in each other's arms was a spectacle which no looker-on could have beheld unmoved.

Lord Castlemere passed his hand hurriedly across his eyes, and slipped quietly from the room, leaving them alone together.

"Jack is not the boy to refuse her anything now in her sorrow," he said to himself as the door closed softly behind him. "She is more like an angel than a woman, God bless her."

Jack, indeed, knew that he could refuse her nothing ; neither was it possible for him to bring any fresh trouble to her stricken heart.

A few minutes later, as he knelt at her feet before the sofa upon which she had sunk down, taking his hands into hers and looking straight into his eyes, she said to him :

“ My boy, be open with me—confide in me ! Do not hide anything from your mother. Often I have wondered if there was not something in your life of which you are ashamed, of which you cannot speak to your uncle nor to me, something which makes the idea of marriage difficult to you, some undesirable connection, some entanglement ? ”

And the colour rose into her soft, pale face at the bare mention of such terrible things even to her son.

Jack’s eyes fell, and he too flushed slightly as he answered :

“ There is nothing, mother, of which I am ashamed—there is no entanglement.”

“ There is nothing then which stands in honour between you and Agnes ? ” she persisted.

Half a second of silence. There went on a brief struggle within him.

His better self urged him to own the truth ; his worst self argued that it would be folly to do so. Already he half regretted the impulse which had carried him away into a confession of his love for Madge—already he reminded himself that to win her he would have to wade through so many difficulties and complications that it would possibly be wiser were he to desist from a suit which might never be successful. Her aunt, perhaps, would never allow her to marry him, and would certainly take care that he never saw her again. His mother would be distressed. His uncle very angry, indeed. Why make things uncomfortable and unpleasant for himself at home by mentioning that which need possibly never be mentioned ? It would be better, in any case, not to commit himself until he saw how things were likely to go at Fairmead Hall. Nothing could be gained by cutting away the ground under his feet at present.

So, after a short but stormy pause, during which all these things rushed headlong through his brain, Jack looked up into Lady Mary’s face and answered her question.

“ There is nothing, mother.”

It was, perhaps, the first time in his whole life that he had ever told her a deliberate lie. When he had spoken the words he felt himself to be a mean coward—false to her, and a traitor to his love.

He sprang to his feet and went away from her, standing with his face to the window and his back to the room.

His sense of shame was at that moment so great that had his mother said more to him, had she spoken openly of his proposed marriage with Miss Verinder, or urged him to take any immediate steps with respect to it—he must even then have laid bare to her the wretchedness of his self-reproach. But Lady Mary said nothing at all. All her sorrow had been unable to crush out of this little lady the ruling instincts of her nature. All her life she had managed the men she had lived with—father, brothers, husband and brother-in-law—all had fallen in turn beneath the sway of her unperceived persuasions, all had been led and guided by the invisible gossamer threads with which she had instinctively entwined them.

Needless to say, she was managing her son at this moment. He was quite unconscious of it, but he yielded all the same to the subtle influence. She neither argued nor pleaded, nor discussed the situation, she simply let it alone and took everything for granted.

For two days her conversations with her son were entirely confined to matters of business. She made him feel, and the sensation was by no means an unpleasurable one, that he had become a person of considerable importance in the family councils.

She consulted him, deferred to his opinions, adopted his suggestions in a manner which was certainly flattering to his vanity. Lord Castlemere, too, treated him with more consideration than formerly, and altogether he began to perceive that his position as next heir to the title was one of increased importance.

All this lulled him into false security. He began to believe that, after all, he might, when these few days of necessary mourning were over, return unscathed, save by that small, mean lie, to Madge. He might woo her and win her yet, and his mother and uncle, when the thing was done past recovery, might not impossibly be induced to relinquish their pet scheme, and permit him to marry to please himself.

These thoughts endured for two whole days. After that there came a rude awakening. On the third day Agnes Verinder came back to her father's house.

It was an event which Lady Mary was well aware was about to occur, but of which she had thought it well to keep her son in ignorance.

Miss Verinder was in a frame of mind to play absolutely into Lady Mary's hands. No sooner had she heard the news of Colonel Ludlow's death, than she instantly determined to become the future Lady Castlemere. As the next heir

to his uncle, Jack rose in her estimation enormously. Jack had become a matrimonial prize in the market. It would be as well, perhaps, to secure him, before somebody else did so. That was the reason why Miss Verinder determined to relinquish the joys of the moribund season—to forego Goodwood and Cowes and to return instantly to the rural solitude of Deep Deane. It was also the reason why she indited a charming letter to Lady Mary, telling her that she had not the heart to go out and enjoy herself whilst her dearest friends were in such heartrending grief, and that she was therefore coming home in order to be with them, and sympathize with them in their sorrow.

Lady Mary shed a few quiet tears over the letter, as she folded it up and locked it away in her writing-table. It seemed to her to be the sweetest and dearest letter in the world.

"She has a heart of gold," she said to herself. "She will make a good wife—it will be the best and happiest thing in the world for Jack to marry her."

She honestly believed it. She believed, too, that Agnes loved her son. She saw the girl through the halo of her own fond hopes and wishes, and credited her with a great many things which she did not possess.

Mrs. George, who knew Agnes thoroughly, could have told her better, but then Lady Mary did not consult Mrs. George, and Mrs. George was not at all likely to volunteer information concerning her niece.

Meanwhile Agnes arrived at her father's house, burning for conquest and for success. She did not care a brass farthing for Jack Ludlow, but she intended to marry him. The position would suit her, and the man would answer to her ideal of a husband. Jack would, for certain, make a very easy-going husband.

From frequently discussing his character with his mother, she was intimately acquainted with it. He was weak and pliable, and she would be able to do as she liked with him. She was sure he would never interfere with her, and that she would be able to do exactly as she pleased. That was Agnes' notion of perfection in a husband.

Personally she admired him, and his insensibility towards her charms had piqued her into a certain excitement with regard to him. She thought it would certainly interest her to make him fall desperately in love with her.

On the afternoon of her arrival, Lady Mary in her deep weeds, safely secluded within the shelter of the brougham, drove over to call upon her.

The two women sat together for upwards of an hour, and it was arranged between them that Agnes and her father should come over to Castle Regis and dine there quietly that

very evening. Then Lady Mary talked a great deal, whilst Agnes, with downcast eyes and a maidenly flush upon her beautiful face, listened attentively and answered occasionally in monosyllables. And the conversation, naturally was chiefly about Jack.

It may be taken for granted that Lady Mary said nothing concerning her hopes for her son that could misbecome the absolute discretion and refinement of a well-bred lady, and yet somehow and in some fashion the idea was conveyed from her rambling, disconnected sentences and effectually brought home to her listener's understanding, that they two, being thoroughly at one about the object to be attained, must practice some little amount of *finesse* in the bringing of it to pass.

"Jack, dear fellow, was so sensitive, so tender-hearted ! He was so unnerved by his father's death ; his grief seemed almost to have absorbed all other feelings. It would be good for him to draw him out of himself." This from his mother.

Then Agnes sighed, and looked down, and murmured :

"I know—I know. I can guess what he must feel—poor, dear Jack !"

So that a great deal of sympathy and a thorough mutual understanding was established between the two ladies during that hour of quiet conversation.

When they parted they clung fondly to each other and kissed one another tenderly, and Lady Mary went her way thoroughly comforted and hopeful, and absolutely convinced that Agnes Verinder was deeply and truly attached to her son, and that by her judicious interference she was doing him the greatest service in the world.

As to Agnes, when she was left alone with no other companion save her own beautiful image reflected in the long mirror in front of her, she drew herself up to her full height, reached up her arms above her head, and yawned widely and undisguisedly.

After which a slow smile of triumph played over her lips.

"So ! Master Jack wants helping on a bit, does he, my lady ? Well, I think you showed me your cards pretty plainly, although I flatter myself I did the modest *ingénue* tolerably successfully, and you have not been able to see through me quite. Well, it won't be hard work ! Jack is but a man like the others. I expect I shall not find it very difficult. After dinner—moonlight—the terrace, the scent of the roses ! Bah ! men are such fools ! it's very soon done ! Then I shall have to take my time about getting rid of the other, quietly and without any fuss or *scène* ; that will not be nearly so easy, but I can do it during

the course of the winter, and then, next season ! I am tired of single bliss, I shall do better another year as a married woman and as the future Lady Castlemere ! Who knows, indeed, that the old boy may not be dead by then ! How well it would read—‘Lady Castlemere on her marriage, by the Duchess of St. Graile,’—yes, the duchess shall present me, I think ! ”

CHAPTER XII.

THE NIGHTINGALE'S SONG.

“ Some eyes there are so ~~lo~~cy
 They seem but given
 As splendid beacons solely
 To light to Heaven !
 While some—On ~~ne~~er believe them—
 With tempting ray,
 Would lead us (God forgive them !)
 The other way.

—MOORE.

“ COME out, Jack, it is so hot indoors. How lovely the garden looks with the moonlight all over the lawn ! And the stars ! did you ever see a more perfect night ? ”

Jack, nothing loth, followed her out into the verandah, and from the verandah down the wide steps on to the lawn.

It was very sad and dull indoors. No one spoke very much, his mother's eyes were heavy with weeping, his uncle and Sir Herbert sighed very often. To smile or to make a joke so soon after poor Colonel Ludlow's death, would have seemed almost a crime. Jack had felt his father's death acutely, for he was affectionate by nature—there was no want of feeling in him—but all the same at five-and-twenty, that constant tension of woe is a thing that it is very hard to keep up. Many times during the last two days, he had longed almost painfully to shake off—if but for one hour—that terrible pall of oppression which brooded upon Castle Regis like the blackness of a London fog.

He had even debated within himself whether it would hurt his mother's feelings if he went out for a long ride, but he had pulled himself up in time with the conviction that the very mention of a horse must of necessity be horrible to her. Ordinary topics of conversation were tabooed, politics sounded out of place, the gossip of the neighbourhood, heartless to the verge of cruelty. Even the dogs had been banished to the stable-yard, lest their joyful barkings should jar upon the hushed sorrow of the silent house.

Under these circumstances, the arrival of Sir Herbert and Agnes to dinner was, in itself, an unspeakable relief to one, at least, of the party. Never had the heiress been so

thoroughly welcome in Jack's eyes. She was young and she was alive. She had not lost a near relative. She could, and did, smile at him with a refreshing cheerfulness to which he was not ashamed to respond with an answering and grateful brightness.

No wonder that when she invited him out into the moonlit garden after dinner, he jumped at the suggestion with an alacrity which filled her with amusement as much as with satisfaction.

The garden—as gardens from the creation of the world have ever been known to be—was a very pitfall of temptation. It was next to impossible for two young persons thrown entirely upon each other's society to wander under those arches of roses and clematis that led down the gentle slope towards the lake without assuming a loverlike attitude towards one another.

There was all the witchery of the summer night in the air : the absolute stillness, the subtle odours of a thousand flowers, and, over all the silver moon was shining down upon the beautiful world beneath, with tender and harmonious radiance.

Not even a footfall as they walked, for under their feet lay a carpet of softest turf, whilst the flower entwined arches overhead cast flickering shadows upon the silent coup'e.

Jack was impressionable and impulsive, and he was only five-and-twenty. He began, indeed, by looking at the moon and thinking about Madge, wishing that she were with him instead of Agnes Verinder. Then he got tired of looking at the moon—as who would not with a woman, tall and divinely beautiful, at his side?—and so, after awhile, he looked at his companion instead.

Her black lace dress was open at the neck, and the satin whiteness of her neck and bosom shone with almost an unearthly brilliance in the silver of the moonlight. Her arm, smooth and round as polished marble, almost brushed against his sleeve as they walked, his eyes rested with something like wonder upon its beauty. From shoulder to wrist it was bare, and the dazzling, milky whiteness of it took away his breath a little. Instinctively he drew a little nearer to her.

“Are you not cold, Agnes?” he said, with just a little pause before her name. The question was common-place enough, but the voice was caressing in its gentleness.

“Oh, no,” she answered, showing him a lace scarf she carried in her hand. “It is so warm, and I have brought this with me in case I require it.”

Then silence again. Only now, Jack could not take his eyes off her. They were rivetted upon her beautiful profile, upon the bent head and the drooping eyelashes, upon the

glorious figure with its slow languid movements. A sort of intoxication began to fill his veins. This was the woman they wanted him to marry, to have for his very own, this magnificent goddess to whose wonderful beauty he seemed to be only now awaking for the first time. The very thought of it turned his blood into fire !

Meanwhile, Agnes was thinking, "How stupid he is ! Why does he not speak ? he does nothing but stare ! anybody else would have made love to me long ago !"

Then suddenly she stopped and turned round, looking up at a cluster of Gloire de Dijon roses overhead.

"Pick me a rose, Jack, one of those beauties up there. I can't reach it," she stretched up her white arm towards the flower.

Jack picked it obediently, cutting it off with his penknife and placing it respectfully into her fingers.

Miss Verinder took it without a word of thanks and pinned it into her dress, but she bit her lips with annoyance.

"What a fool ! is it innocence, or ignorance ? or does he dislike me, I wonder ? Great Heavens ! I hope it is not that he is in love with somebody else !"

The bare idea of such a thing to the spoilt imperious beauty was horrible. A rival, was what she could never endure ! If another woman existed in his life, then he must be made to forget that woman !

The possibility that such might be the case did but spur her on to renewed exertions.

They had emerged from beneath the arcade of roses and stood upon the margin of the lake.

The scene was lovely beyond words. Not a breeze ruffled the surface of the water, not a sound broke the utter stillness of the air. The lake slept mirror-like at their feet, bathed in the silver glory of the moonlight. Wide spreading branches of great chesnut trees which encircled the banks, hung low down over the pool, casting around it a fringe of deep and mysterious shadow. An islet crowned with feathery larches and gemmed with starlike flowers arose in the centre, whilst a coronet of waterlilies rested like a diadem of fairy jewels midway between the island and the shore.

Suddenly out of the silence there arose the deep throbbing note of the nightingale, piercing the stillness with a wild abandonment of ecstasy. Involuntarily, as it seemed, Agnes' hand sought Jack's, as they stood breathlessly side by side to listen.

Trill after trill, the warbling cadences poured from the invisible songster—the rich voluptuous notes thrilled through the balmy air—louder, louder, louder, arose the

hymn of praise to the goddess of the night : a poem of passionate rapture, swelling into a very rhapsody of delight—then dying away note after note—fainter and yet fainter—sweeter and sadder—until the last tender echo of the wonderful melody was hushed once more into the mystery of silence.

Their hands were fast locked together. Instinctively their eyes met—it was not for nothing that the bird of love had sung ! In the man's eyes the passion of the moment was aroused—in the woman's there was a gleam of triumph, for she knew the danger and reckoned upon the consequences with the cool head of the experienced gambler, but, as for Jack, he only lost his head, frankly, fairly, and absolutely blindly.

Still, although his brain was on fire and his heart beating wildly—a something—a mere nothing, would even now have saved him from his worse nature, have dragged him back again to his better self. In the hands of a good woman—of a woman of even average feminine reticence and modesty, he might have pulled himself together yet. But Agnes Verinder had no intention of letting him off. She was a woman who knew perfectly well what she was about, and her objects were never in any way guided either by goodness or by feminine reticence.

She saw that he required one little push still to topple him over the edge of the precipice, and that little propelling shove she straightway proceeded to administer to him.

“ After all, I am rather cold ! please put this on for me Jack ! ” and she held up the filmy white lace scarf she had shown to him a moment ago—“ will you wrap it round my neck please ? ”

Jack, with uncertain fingers prepared to obey her.

Miss Verinder innocently held up her face till it was within a few inches of his own. She lifted her splendid eyes, and they seemed to pour their magnetic fire into his very soul; under the dim witchery of the moonlit she was more gloriously beautiful than ever.

Their fingers met, he trembled as he touched the fragrant softness of her scented hair, and as he knotted the lace beneath her chin his hand brushed against the white loveliness of her rounded throat.

In the next moment, reason, common sense, and honour were flung to the winds ! he held her in his arms close against his breast, whilst in the fierce glow of an ungovernable outburst of passion he rained down kisses upon her lips and throat and arm.

Then—when the temptress had safely accomplished her work—all at once Miss Verinder awoke up into a highly virtuous, and indignantly outraged young woman.

"Jack! Jack! she cried angrily, pushing him back and struggling to free herself with all the strength she possessed "what do you mean? how dare you! let me go at once, how dare you insult me like that!"

Jack—feeling very much as if a jug of cold water had been poured over his head—released her at once, and Miss Verinder began walking towards the house at such a pace up the grass slope that he could scarcely keep up with her.

When he was capable of thinking rationally upon any subject, it began to cause him considerable surprise that Agnes should be pouring forth rapid and violent invectives against himself as she went.

"You have grossly insulted me!" she said over and over again—"in the whole course of my life no man has ever treated me like that before!"

"I am very sorry," murmured poor Jack humbly and penitently. "I—I really don't know how it happened," his head was still going round a little bit with the violence of his late agitation, and with the suddenness of the change in her attitude—"I—I—only kissed you, Agnes!"

"Only *kissed* me indeed! A man does not kiss a lady like that—"

"Oh, yes, I think so, sometimes'" he plucked up courage to answer.

"Never!" she cried decidedly—"unless he is going to make her his wife—to every other woman, such kisses as you have given me are an outrage!"

Poor Jack! he was decidedly not a match for this astute young lady

Of course he ought not to have answered a single word! Instead of which he fell into the trap headlong! There was no time to reflect or consider—he did not pause a moment to see where he was stumbling, or how he had better save himself; he was so stung to the quick by her reproaches that he remembered nothing, and thought of nothing save of how he was to right himself in her estimation.

"I have not insulted you Agnes!" he cried hotly. "Why should you not be the woman who is to be my wife?"

Half a minute of silence, during which reason and recollection rushed back in a flood upon him and his heart beat tumultuously, not with love, but with a wild anguish of conviction of the thing he had done.

Then Miss Verinder passed her hand tranquilly under his arm and answered quite sweetly and composedly, "Oh, in that case, of course it is a very different thing! and I quite forgive you, Jack, "I think," she added, after a moment's pause, during which she possibly expected some suitable reply—but which elicited nothing but the deepest silence from her companion. "I think we shall get on very well

together—you see, after all, we have known each other all our lives, and our parents and guardians all approve of it!"

Poor Jack never uttered a single word. He was struck dumb as though with a physical blow on the head.

He never knew how they got back to the house together ; he never heard the little prattle of affectionate words with which Miss Verinder—wise woman that she was! covered the awkwardness of his own silence and smoothed over the anomalies of a situation which might have become exceedingly unpleasant.

He did not, in fact, hear a single word she said. All that he did hear was that same loud-throated nightingale singing away again in the tree-tops down by the lake side, and to his fevered fancy, the song had changed ! No longer did the wild notes tempt him with the passion of slumbrous eyes, and the bewilderment of cream white neck and arms—no longer did the rapturous ecstasy of lover's kisses burst siren-like from the love-bird's voluptuous cadences—but sadly, plaintively, reproachfully, the far away music seemed now to wail and sob and moan—breathing the name which, in that moment of madness he had forgotten and betrayed—the name that he remembered now, too late, in his shame and his despair.

"Madge ! Madge ! Madge !" sang the nightingale into the distance of the sad still night.

CHAPTER XIII.

DAYS OF WAITING.

"Or having sworn too hard a keeping oath
Study to break it, and not break my troth."

—SHAKESPEARE.

WHILST these events, both sad and important to my hero, were taking place at Castle Regis, Madge Durham possessed her soul with what patience she could, in the quiet old house amongst the Fairley water meadows.

In these days of waiting, Madge developed rapidly from the ignorance and innocence of her strange secluded girlhood into the knowledge and the understanding which womanhood was bringing home to her.

At first, the shock and the disappointment of Jack's failure to keep his promise to her had been very great indeed. All day long she had waited and watched for him, afraid to leave the house, for fear he should come in her absence, yet full of a blind faith in the words that he had spoken to her. Something—she could not imagine what, had prevented him from coming : her heart, in the early part of the day ached with suspense and with disappointment, but as the day

waned and the afternoon wore towards evening, her mind became racked with anxiety and apprehension. Some evil thing must have befallen him !

At half-past six she gave up all hopes of his coming, and slipping out of the house by herself, she ran down to the river side.

Soon she was out of sight of the house, paddling herself up stream in her tiny canoe. She felt that if she could get to the *Naiad* all would be explained and understood at once.

But when she turned the bend of the stream and got beyond the islands—there, indeed, lay the *Naiad* upon the bosom of the waters—but there was no sign of life within or without her? Not a living soul was on board. The doors were shut and fastened, the blinds were drawn down, the flowers drooped unwatered in the hanging baskets, there was not even little Vic to welcome her with a joyful bark, for Antonio had taken her away with him. Puzzled and discouraged, Madge turned slowly homewards, and the little cockleshell craft floated almost of herself down stream, towards the Fairmead boat-house, whilst the paddle lay almost unused across the gunwale: What had happened, where were they all? Why had they gone away? Nevertheless, she did not in all her sadness doubt him for an instant. Neither then, nor through any of the dreary days which followed did she for one moment imagine that Jack was in any fashion false to her. Not all the teachings of the old aunts at home, not all the railings at the treachery of men, not all the warnings against their perfidy which had been instilled into her, ever since her childhood, were able for one single instant to implant mistrust and suspicion in her mind against this one particular man.

“He told me that he loved me and that he would come and claim me—that nothing should part us. If I were to doubt him I should be unworthy of his love. I cannot understand it now, but when he comes, then, no doubt, it will all seem quite simple.”

This was the burden of her faithful thoughts. Strange that so eccentric a training so carefully pursued for so long, when the time to test its value came, should break down so utterly and so entirely. The voice of love and of nature had spoken in her heart, and all else was brushed away and forgotten like the veriest cobwebs.

Yet, by the very pain which she endured, she grew to learn the strength of her own newly awakened feelings. Everyday she arose to a fresh period of hope, every night she went to rest with that sickness of deferred longing, which is so bitter and so hard to bear. Still she neither wept, nor doubted, nor despaired. Madge had been too healthily reared in the strong, sweet country life which had

been educating her silently for years, to yield like a love-sick maiden, to hysterical bemoanings and bewailings. She went through her daily occupations quietly and unobtrusively, she practised her music and studied her history-books, she tended her pets and watered her plants, outwardly very much as usual, yet inwardly with that dull heartache which no one but herself knew about. And every evening she went up to the deserted *Naiad*.

One day—it seemed a month since Jack had gone—in reality it was scarcely a week—when she came in sight of it, she found that the house-boat was empty no longer ; Vic. was jumping about in the punt at the side, and Antonio's swarthy face grinned through the kitchen door at her as she approached ; he was scrubbing, and cleaning, and washing up, in the most familiar fashion. Her heart gave a bound of delight at the sight of him. They were coming back then !

“ Oh, Antonio, I am so glad to see you, I thought you had all gone away. When did you come back ? ”

“ I come back, signora ? Ah ! but I have nevare been away.”

“ Not been away ? Why, I’ve been up every single day to see, and the whole place was shut up. Tell me where you have been, and where the gentlemen have gone.”

Then Antonio placed his forefinger against his nose and indulged in a portentous wink.

“ I will tell you all, mees, if you will just understand and remember that Antonio has not been away at all, not one single day, only into the village to de shops—see ? ”

Madge laughed, and Antonio nodded his head and winked again. “ Monsieur Parkare, he come back dis day. Subito, he vill be here now, I get de punt ready in one minute to go across.”

“ And Mr. Ludlow ? ”

But her timid question remained unanswered, for Lance, shouldering his Gladstone bag, was that very moment shouting from the towing-path.

When Lance had stuck his glass hastily into his eye, and had discovered that beyond a question it was Madge herself who was conversing with Antonio under the bows of the *Naiad*, his broad, red face became redder than ever. Very soon he was shaking hands with her and begging her to come on board and rest. But Madge would not do that, much as she longed to hear something of Jack.

Then Lance offered to scull her home, and Madge was unable to refuse herself this chance of learning what she desired to know. She waited in her skiff whilst Lance got himself into his flannels, which he did in an incredibly short space of time, and stepped into the *Fairy* with a glowing face. But all the way back he would talk of nothing but

himself, the races he had been to, the country house he had been staying in, the invitations he had received to go away and shoot.

"In fact," said Lance with hesitation, "I've really only come back for twenty-four hours now ; I shall go away up North to-morrow night, unless—unless—" and here Mr. Parker's voice suddenly failed him ; he rested his sculls upon the surface of the water and looked down fixedly at the stretcher.

"You are going away again !" she repeated. The utter dismay in her voice was absolutely unmistakeable. For if he was going away, was it likely that Jack would return ? For a moment her heart failed her ; for a moment, too, poor Lance deceived himself—he leant forward with a sudden excitement.

"Miss Madge, is it possible that you would care if I went ? That you would miss me ? I know I'm an uncouth, rough sort of chap, not accustomed to talk nicely to ladies—not like Jack—"

"Ah, about Mr. Ludlow," she exclaimed hastily, the hot blood flaming up into her face. Love had taught her something already. "I have been wanting so much to ask you about him. Where is your friend, Mr. Parker ? When is he coming back ?"

He took up the sculls and rowed on again in absolute silence—it was as though he had been plunged suddenly into deep, cold waters—his red, jovial face, that a moment ago was so jolly and eager, looked grey, and wan, and sad. Madge turned her eyes quickly away with a horrible feeling of guilt, and gazed abstractedly at the green shadowy banks that floated past them. Her heart was beating with a little unknown feeling of terror. She need not have been afraid. Presently Lance spoke, and his voice was somehow all changed.

"Ah, Jack ! yes, to be sure. You have not heard about Jack, I daresay ? Poor chap, he has lost his father. It was an accident, horribly sudden, I believe. Jack was telegraphed for, but he did not get there in time ; then of course he has had to stay with his mother."

She drew a rapid breath. It was all explained at last ! Poor Jack, poor sorrowing son, whose widowed mother wanted him !

"Oh, he must indeed be a great comfort to his poor mother," she murmured softly, with a heavenly pity in her tender eyes.

"There is nobody like Jack, Miss Durham," said Lance stoutly, and his voice was more like itself now. "Not in my opinion, at least."

Then there was a silence. Only the soft dip of the sculls

into the water and the dull, regular click as they sprang backwards from the rowlocks.

What Lancelot Parker went through in those few moments of silence no one but himself ever knew ; although, perhaps, Madge, with her new-born comprehensions, may have dimly guessed at it.

“Jack may be back any time now, though I shall not be here to see him,” continued Lance presently in quite an ordinary matter-of-fact manner. “I am thinking I shall go by the twelve o’clock train to-morrow after all ; it gets one up to Town in good time, then I can get on North by the night mail. You—you must tell Jack about me, I shall not have time to write. Jack is the dearest fellow in the world,” he went on, somewhat incoherently ; “he is quite sure to be back to-morrow or the next day, he was awfully upset at being sent for in such a hurry.”

All at once Lance seemed to understand the full meaning of his friend’s strange manner when he had got the telegram that had summoned him away, and many things that had been dark became clear as daylight to him.

They were nearing the boat-house, and Lance was pulling the nose of the skiff round to the stream. All at once Madge leant forward.

“Mr. Parker, I am very, very sorry you are going away,” her face was rosy red, but there was something very like tears in her eyes.

“Thank you, Miss Madge, thank you for saying it.”

“Mr. Parker, I want you to be my friend always, all my life.”

Then his voice broke, and he bent over the hand she had reached impulsively out to him.

“And so I will be your friend, so help me God—to my life’s end.”

“If I should ever be in trouble or want help, Mr. Parker, I will come to you to help me.”

“God bless you, dear, for saying that,” he murmured.

“Tell me where I can find you if ever I want you.”

He drew a card from his pocket-book. “That address will always reach me in time.” And then he took her hand and held it hard within his own. She stepped on to the little landing-stage.

“Good-bye, Mr. Parker.”

“Good-bye, Miss Madge, God bless you—you and Jack too ; think of me always, as your friend and his.”

So the next day Lancelot Parker went away again, and the *Naiad* was left once more to Antonio and to Vic.

“She is the only woman I ever loved,” he said to himself as he craned his head out of the train to catch the last glimpse of the woods of Fairmead Hall. “My noble-hearted lass who

would not let me speak, or put me to shame by the confession of my hopeless love ! How many of your town-bred girls would have done as much I wonder ! Well, now that I know she loves him it makes everything much easier for me. Either of us might have had the luck to win her, and I can't wonder at its being Jack—he is so much better than I am in every way. What am I indeed, to win a girl like that by the side of Jack ? God bless her. I hope he will make her happy. Now his father is dead and he has become his own master, there should be no difficulties in the way."

Meanwhile at this very hour Jack Ludlow was speeding southwards as fast as rail and steam could carry him.

If ever a lost soul shut without the doors of Paradise realised its unutterable despair, and gazed horror-stricken into the yawning depths of its own wretchedness—so did Jack Ludlow realise his own undoing as he journeyed southwards on the morrow of that night on which Agnes Verinder had lured him down into the whirlpool of her lawless will.

What had not a few moments of wild and ungovernable passion done for him ! Into what black abyss of despair had they not plunged him ? What a horrible transformation had taken place in himself ? What had become of his faith and truth to her he loved ? of all his sweet dreams of love and happiness ?

They were all withered, and scorched, and shrivelled up, as with the touch of a foul pestilence.

Flight had been the only thing left to him. The hideous nightmare of his mother's blessings and his uncle's congratulations which followed the revolting self-possession of Miss Verinder's triumphant announcements, had left his mind in so fearful a state of chaos that rising early from his sleepless bed—he had had no other resource save to leave a lame message for his mother to the effect that his morning letters called him imperatively up to Town, and to fly from the house before she had left her room. He was half-way to the station before she learnt of his departure.

He flung himself into the train with only one thought, one instinctive desire—to put miles between himself and Agnes Verinder.

For some time he sat alone in the corner of the railway-carriage with his face hidden in his hands, incapable of aught save a wild and irrational desire to get away from her. Then conscience began to awake and to revile him for his baseness. He loathed himself—yet still more did he loathe her who had dragged him down into this wretchedness.

In measure as the distance increased between himself and her, so did she appear to him more and more, to be clothed in the most odious colours. All the meanness of her motives

and the unwomanliness of her actions revealed themselves to him in their naked hideousness.

Backed up by his mother's earnest wishes and by his uncle's approval, Agnes Verinder had flung herself at his head, using her wonderful beauty as the lure to lead him on to his undoing. And this she had done not because she loved him—or then he might have forgiven her—but because she wanted to become Lady Castlemere of Castle Regis!

This appeared to be clear as daylight to him to-day! Why, ah why! had he been so blinded as not to see it all last night?

By-and-bye he began to face the situation more calmly—turning over in his mind what he had better do.

Of one thing he was resolved. He would not marry Miss Verinder. He was, he supposed, bound to her by what had been said and done—but had he not been in honour bound previously elsewhere? Nevertheless, being essentially weak, Jack shrank so fearfully from the unpleasant task of mentioning this fact to Miss Verinder herself, that he determined that he would write from London to his mother, make a clean breast of it to her, and leave her to get him out of his scrape in the best way she could.

When he reached the hotel in Piccadilly where he usually put up, he employed his time after dining at his Club, in writing numberless letters to his mother, all of which he tore up one after the other. Finally he determined to sleep on it and write again in the morning when he should be calmer and more able to grapple with the difficulty. But the morning's post brought him a letter from his uncle which changed all his plans.

Lord Castlemere was evidently extremely annoyed that Jack had been obliged to leave them so suddenly. Miss Verinder, he told him, seemed to feel much hurt at his unexpected departure—but worse than this, his mother had fainted on being told of her son's extraordinary proceedings. "It is not the first time," wrote Lord Castlemere, "that your dear mother has alarmed us in this way—any little shock lately has seemed to bring on these unpleasant attacks. She recovered almost directly, I am thankful to say—before Dr. Smedley arrived, in fact—but he tells me that she ought to be kept very quiet and free of agitation. You see her system has been thoroughly shaken by your dear father's death, and she has never been strong—so my dear boy be careful in your letters not to write anything of a disturbing nature that might upset her again, and come back to us as soon as you have completed your business, or a certain young lady will have good cause to be seriously offended.

"Your affectionate Uncle."

On the top of this letter it was evidently impossible that Jack should make that startling communication to Lady Mary which he had intended to indite to her this morning.

He wrote no letter to Castle Regis at all. What he did was to go to Paddington, and take the first train to Fairley.

Now it must be understood that Fairley Station is on a branch line. The junction is fourteen miles distant from it. There are several through trains to Fairley in the day—or at least there are trains by which, if you have to change at the junction, you can at any rate go on almost immediately to your destination by another. But in the present instance Jack Ludlow in his haste and impetuosity, had started by a slow train, and when he was landed at the junction he discovered to his disgust, that there would be nothing on the branch line to take him on to Fairley for nearly two hours.

The junction is not a cheerful place. The station is small and draughty—there is neither book-stall nor waiting-room. It stands in a desolate tract of country, and save for the line of low cottages behind it, inhabited chiefly by the employés of the railway, there is scarcely a human habitation within a mile of it.

The day was showery and chilly, and to be forced to wait close upon two hours in this melancholy spot would have been, to a man in Jack's present feverish state of mind, well nigh maddening.

A great resolve had been steadily growing upon him since he left Paddington—something so wonderful and so audacious that his brain was on fire and his heart was beating at the bare thought of it.

The delay at this wretched junction was insupportable to him. If he was to do this thing, he must do it speedily, before he had had time to grow calm again or to count the cost of what he purposed. If he could have got a special train to take him on he would have done so—but there was not such a thing to be had for money in this little wayside place. Neither was there a vehicle of any sort or kind to be procured. Jack, however, knew that the distance, which by road and rail was fully fourteen-miles, by striking across a range of hills which lay midway, could be shortened very considerably to a foot-passenger who knew the way. It could be barely a nine mile tramp across the hills.

He left his portmanteau to be sent on by the next train, and started off by himself to walk to Fairley.

And this walk was strangely destined to be the turning point in the history of Madge Durham.

For some miles Jack trudged along in the now fast falling rain, encased in a mackintosh coat, and plunged in reflections and mental arguments, which were of so exciting a nature as

to render him quite impervious to the inclemency of the weather.

All at once, on rounding the top of the hills he found himself within a stone's-throw of the upland village of Cumpton-on-the-Hill, and he recollects his old college friend, the Reverend Cyril Storey.

To pass by his very doors without giving him a greeting, would he felt, be churlish in the highest degree--and even if he had designed to do so, it would have been now impossible, for at this moment he perceived his friend, bearing an umbrella, and clad in a long waving black cloak which reached nearly to his ankles, advancing rapidly along the little village street towards him.

Mr. Storey, with joy unspeakable, had caught sight of him. The loneliness of this poor young vicar's life was so terrible that he would have gladly welcomed a visitant from the nether world had such a mythical being chanced at any time to alight in the High Street of Cumpton-on-the-Hill ; it may be imagined therefore with what glee he recognised in the far distance, the tall and slender form of his old college acquaintance.

His long legs strode rapidly along the muddy road, scattering far and wide, as he came, a mixed crowd of babies, dogs, and ducks, which seemed to be congregated about him, whilst his eager voice sang out joyfully :

“ Hallo, Ludlow ! where on earth do you hail from ? Who would have thought of your turning up here on such a day as this ! ”

Jack explained that, having come by the wrong train, he had started to walk to Fairley sooner than wait, kicking his heels, for two hours at the Junction.

“ Capital ! ‘it's an ill wind,’ you see ! Now you'll stop and take pot luck with me, won't you ? ”

“ I can't do that, my dear fellow. I want to get back ; besides, Parker will be alone.”

“ Not a bit of it. Parker went up to Town this morning—I was down in Fairley myself, and I met him hurrying off to the station to catch the 10.30 train. You'd much better stop with me and dine, and I'll walk half-way down the hills with you afterwards.”

The news of Lance's absence acted considerably upon Jack's mind. He had meant to consult Lance—to ask his advice on a certain matter—he had even imagined that it was his intention to abide by his advice, whatever it might chance to be. But this, of course, was self-delusion, because when a man's mind is pretty well made up, he only asks for advice in order to be strengthened in his own opinion, and if the advice happens to be contrary to that opinion, he votes the adviser an ignorant fool and goes his own way just the same.

However, it pleased him to think that he would have taken Lance's opinion on this particular subject had he been able to do so. As it was, the matter in hand was one which admitted of no delay. As he could not ask Lance Parker for advice, why should he not ask Cyril Storey? It is possible indeed, so deceptive is the human heart, that he was dimly conscious that the clergyman's advice might be more in accordance with his own wishes, than Lance Parker's might have been.

Lance had a crude, horrible, downright fashion of regarding things from a common-sense and common-honesty point of view, which he might have found very difficult to combat.

Now Storey was a clergyman—and one knows beforehand what sort of view a clergyman, from the necessities of his cloth, is bound to take upon certain subjects; there is no other view indeed, save one, which he can take consistently with the preachings of his profession.

These thoughts having rapidly flashed through his mind, Jack ended by accepting Mr. Storey's proffered hospitality.

They turned in together at the low door of the little vicarage, which was indeed a miserable specimen of its class, being little more than a better sort of cottage. Jack divested himself of his dripping macintosh, and his host—having ascertained, from a brief interview with the elderly woman who acted as his cook, housemaid, and housekeeper, that his modest dinner could easily be stretched to meet the wants of two—proceeded to kindle a fire in the grate, and, installing his friend in his one arm-chair, drew forth pipes and a jar of tobacco in anticipation of a thoroughly cosy hour with his unexpected visitor.

During these proceedings Jack had come to the conclusion that, far from wasting time, by this delay at Cumpton-on-the-Hill he was, in point of fact, considerably helping on and accelerating the end which he had in view—which demonstrates clearly, and beyond a doubt, how much and how little he intended that any advice or counsel he might receive upon the subject should move him in the very slightest from the resolution which was strengthening itself every moment within him.

Having therefore lit his pipe, he lay back in his chair and proceeded to state, after his own fashion, the preliminaries of his case.

CHAPTER XIV.

JACK'S RESOLVE.

“ ‘Twas good advice, and means—
My son, be good,”

CRABBE.

“ I WANT to ask your advice, Storey, as a gentleman and a clergyman.”

Mr. Storey, who was inhaling the first whiffs of his newly-lit pipe with considerable enjoyment, would have very much preferred a yarn over old college days, to any clerical opinion which might be demanded of him; but a priest is like a doctor, and can never drop his profession at any time—he must be always ready to meet any demands which may be made upon him; so at this somewhat formidable appeal Mr. Storey sat up, literally and figuratively, in his chair, and composed his features into a becoming expression of attention and solemnity.

“ Certainly, Ludlow, certainly, I shall be very glad.”

“ Well, I will put the case to you in as simple a form as I can,” proceeded Jack, who, as a matter of fact, was about to wrap up that same case in as many coverings as he knew how. “ For the sake of—of—simplicity, let us say that a friend of mine is in a great difficulty concerning—well concerning a woman.”

Mr. Storey became immediately as grave as a judge—as a disapproving judge into the bargain—for by that vague term “a woman,” what iniquity is not conjured up to the mind clerical!

“ My friend,” continued Jack glibly, staring into the fire and drawing long puffs at his briar-wood, “ considers himself bound in honour to marry a certain girl, although, from family reasons, he is expected to marry a lady for whom he has no affection.”

Now there was no intention to deceive in Jack’s mind, but unfortunately the terms, he made use of misled his friend at the outset. He made it worse by adding as an addenda to the information:

“ A simple country girl.”

To Mr. Storey’s mind, as was perhaps natural, there returned at once sundry little unedifying histories concerning “ simple country girls ” led astray by gentlemen of a superior position, which redounded very little to the credit of either party concerned. Was it wonderful, therefore, that he

straightway jumped at certain conclusions very wide indeed of the truth?

His long, pale face became instantly graver and longer than ever.

"My friend," began Jack again, "considers that he would deeply wrong the girl to whom he is bound, were he to marry the lady whom his friends have destined for him."

"Your friend is quite right," said Mr. Storey decidedly; "he certainly must not do so."

"Then," proceeded Jack, with considerable alacrity, upon this encouragement; "then arises this question. Shall he endeavour to persuade the girl to marry him immediately, in order to save her from a serious trouble, and shall he marry her unknown to his family?"

"I do not see that a man should consider his family in such a case."

"No?—that is what I think too. But then there are other reasons connected with the girl's family, which render it imperative that the marriage, if it takes place, should be absolutely secret—do you think it would be wrong of him to marry her secretly?"

Mr. Storey drew several whiffs at his pipe before answering. He pondered deeply. Very naturally he misunderstood the whole situation. He had no idea, to begin with, that Jack was talking about himself, and he had also no conception that he might himself be committed by any honest answer he might give. Presently he said, slowly and with deep conviction:

"Tell your friend to marry that girl quickly, Jack. God is no respecter of persons—the humble and the gentle are all alike with Him. As a *Christian* your friend should marry her forthwith—secretly if necessary—but without delay by all means."

Jack got up and knocked the ashes of his pipe on to the mantel-shelf. His back was turned to the Vicar. No one in that moment of elation saw his face.

"And you would perform that marriage ceremony in such a case yourself, Storey?"

How on earth was it that the worthy clergyman did not notice the change in his voice?

"Undoubtedly I would do so in such a case."

Jack whipped suddenly round, and stretched out his hand.

"All right, old fellow! you are a brick! and I feel I can reckon on you. I'll come up here and be married by you."

"*You*, Jack? *You*!" gasped the unfortunate Cyril, and there came back in a rush upon him all the worldly wisdom and the prudence of which his timid soul was capable. "Oh, I had no idea you were speaking of yourself, Jack! this is a very serious matter!"

Mr. Storey knew quite well that Jack was Lord Castlemere's heir, and the unholy idea flashed across his mind that in such a case as this, the ordinary stereotyped notions of morality are apt to be somewhat unsuitable and out of place.

But Jack had the whip hand of him now.

"Well! and why not?" he cried cheerily. "Why should I be different to others?"

"Consider your family, Jack. Your uncle!"

"Bother my family and my uncle! Why, my dear Cyril, did you not say a minute ago that God is no respecter of persons, and that the gentle and the simple are one in His eyes? Why am I to be different to other men?"

This was turning the tables with a vengeance. Out of his own mouth the clergyman was worsted.

"Of course," he said after a moment's pause, in his most professional manner, "I did not mean that for a moment. You are not different to other men, and it is as binding upon you to do what is right, as upon the poorest labourer amongst my parishioners."

"Then you will marry us, Cyril?"

"It is a dreadful responsibility!" groaned the unfortunate Vicar, who doubtless at that moment, torn asunder between his conscience and his prudence, devoutly wished that he had never been born. "A terrible responsibility!" he repeated gloomily, "if the girl is—is—what your mother and uncle would never receive?"

"She is nothing of the kind!" cried Jack hotly, "she is charming, they would be proud of her if they knew her."

Still he did not say that she was a Miss Durham of Fairmead, somehow it did not seem necessary to mention this detail. But another idea coming across his mind he hastened to add with a somewhat unusual flush on his face.

"Of course you must understand that all this is strictly private and that I have not even gained her consent to an immediate marriage. What I wanted to know was chiefly whether you approved of the idea, and also whether in the event of my giving you due notice within the next few days you would consent to read the marriage service over us if I bring her up here?"

There was a moment of silence, then Jack burst forth again, and this time with an impetuous ardour which came straight from his sorely-troubled heart.

"Believe me, Cyril! you will be doing a real good work if you will. You do not know what you will be saving me from, what shame—what degradation—what a lifetime of horrible repentance!"

Again the clergyman misunderstood him. The half-told story conveyed but one idea to his mind. A natural shyness and modesty restrained him from questioning more narrowly

into the circumstances of the case. Jack in his misery was conjuring up the possibility of his being driven into a marriage with his evil genius, Miss Verinder. Storey believed those heartfelt words to be wrung from his conscience at the contemplation of a life shadowed by remorse concerning the fate of the "Country girl" whom he had wronged !

Such is the whirligig of human folly and mistake !

The clergyman dared to hesitate no longer—as a priest of the Holy One, to whom all impurity is abhorrent, he had no choice but to rescue the sinners from their sin.

"I will marry you to this girl, Jack, whenever you like ! and whenever you come to me with the proper license to do so, and I will stand by you in your noble resolve to do what is right by her," he said with a certain grave solemnity, adding fervently, "and may God help you to do your duty to her for the remainder of your life."

Even then Jack did not perceive the false impression which he had unconsciously given to his friend of the case. He was so overjoyed to have found support and encouragement, and the promise of practical help from this man that he was not in the least aware of the distorted fashion in which he had unfolded his story.

He fell into a gentle reverie concerning Madge and her loveliness, gazing dreamily into the flames through the transparent clouds of soft grey smoke that arose from his pipe, smiling to himself in a thoroughly foolish and lover-like manner.

Meanwhile Cyril Storey pondered also, but his reflections were scarcely of so pleasant a character.

Storey had his misgivings. Would Lord Castlemere come down upon him with rage and indignation because of this business, when he heard of the part he had played in it ? Would he be blamed for hurrying his friend into a *mésalliance* ? and if the marriage turned out miserably, as such marriages often do, would the responsibility of it rest at his door ? Then again he pulled himself together and took the higher view of it. Right is right, and wrong is wrong, he told himself, no amount of sophistry can turn wrong into right or palliate the sin that is not atoned for in the only real and practical manner which is possible. Yet in spite of this strong conviction, his doubts came back upon him again and again, and because the sinner was Lord Castlemere's heir, some voice within him cried out that this reparation need not necessarily be demanded of him. Cyril Storey believed this inner voice to be undoubtedly that of the Arch Tempter himself, and the battle began all over again. Small wonder perhaps that he floundered and stumbled, and lost his footing amongst these shoals and

pitfalls, for how could he, poor, ignorant, simple-souled man, be expected to read aright that which to the end of time will remain one of the unravelled riddles of this wretched world?

Presently Jack remarked: "After all, Storey, all this is premature. She may not consent to marry me."

Storey roused himself with a start. "Oh, surely yes! Apart from all else, any woman would be glad to marry you."

For a moment a smile crossed his lips. Perhaps it was true! Jack had learnt his own value in the world. He had perceived instantly for instance that Agnes Verinder would be glad to marry him; but when he thought of Madge, the smile faded into a sigh—for your true lover is always diffident.

Madge was different—nothing of that sort would affect her—other arguments would have to be used with her. He would not even tell her who he was, and what he would be; he felt instinctively that if she knew, it would rather defeat his cause than further it.

It was with a somewhat anxious heart after all, that he set out to walk home after dinner, from the Vicarage in the upland village. The Vicar went but a little way with him and then turned back, shaking hands with him heartily and promising him again that he would hold himself in readiness to do what he wished when the proper time came.

Jack trudged on down the muddy lane alone. The rain was over, but heavy clouds racked wildly across the sky, and melancholy gusts of wind swirled amongst the trees. Jack caught himself thinking of his dead father—he wished that he had been alive, for he believed that he would have stood by him. Colonel Ludlow had been a tolerant and broad-minded man. Dearly as Jack loved his mother it was not to her, but to him that he would have turned in this, the crisis of his life. But now he had to act for himself, and it seemed to him that if he accomplished this great purpose, and married Madge Durham, all his difficulties would be smoothed away.

At the bottom of his heart he had no faith in himself. He was certain that he would be unable to be true to her, unless he was irrevocably bound to her.

The woman who had already had the power to lure him away from her, would be able to do it again. There was no safety for him as long as he was free. Although he loathed himself for his weakness and inconstancy, yet he was convinced that were he to be tempted anew he should fall again. That woman's beauty, her siren voice, her languorous grace, had an effect upon which was absolutely maddening. He shuddered now as he recalled her looks and her words,

knowing well that they were neither the looks nor the words of a good woman, yet being perfectly aware that they acted upon his lower nature like the stimulus of a strong wine.

It was not love—God forbid!—which he had felt for her, for no sooner was he out of the influence of her presence than he hated her, but she was one of those women who are irresistibly dangerous to the well-being of a weak man—like Cleopatra of Egypt, she was born to be a curse upon the men who fell under her baleful influence.

To preserve himself against her fascination, it seemed to Jack that he had only to put between him and her the strong unpassable barrier of marriage to the girl he loved, with his heart and his soul. Once in her arms, then surely he would be safe for ever from all other dangers.

He is not the first man, or woman either, who has imagined the marriage service to be a charm against all future evil. It is a common delusion enough.

But although he had no doubts concerning his own intentions, yet his heart failed him a little when he thought about Madge. How would Madge take it? Would she consent to this hurried union, which must, of necessity, be kept secret for a time?

For there was no longer any question in his mind of confronting old Miss Durham and of endeavouring to gain her consent to their engagement. An engagement would not free him from his position towards Agnes; nothing but an immediate marriage would do that, and to that marriage nobody belonging to either of them would be in the very least likely to consent. No, he must either win her and bind her to himself for ever, in secret, or else he must drift back to his relations—his duty to his uncle, his fears of grieving his mother, and his wretched promises to Agnes.

He was determined never to do so. Once let Madge be his wife, and all else would be easy. When the time came he would break the truth to his mother, and implore her to make out the best case she could for him to Miss Verinder and her father, and to mitigate the severity of his uncle's displeasure. This could not be done at once. For a little time, at least, it would be necessary to live a life of deception towards them all, then, at a convenient moment, the truth should be revealed.

This was his programme. How, or where, he was to carry out his married existence, was a point which he did not stop to consider.

If, indeed, he gave it a thought at all, it was to suppose vaguely that he should remain on the *Naiad* and that Madge would still live at Fairmead, and, as Lance was away, it would be easy for them to be together every day. The romance of this arrangement rather struck his fancy. When

he passed Fairmead Hall he looked up at the great house, wrapped in the darkness of the tall elm trees that surrounded it and fancied that the tiny sparkle of light from one of the upper windows came from Madge's room. He kissed his fingers and breathed a blessing to the distant gleam, although, as a matter of fact, it was not Madge at all, but one of the housemaids reading a "penny dreadful" tale in bed, by the light of a tallow candlestick on a chair by the bedside. However, as Jack was unaware of this, he was quite as happy with the poetical little fancy that he had wafted a good-night kiss to his beloved, as though the fancy had been a fact, and he turned into his berth on the *Naiad* a little later on, thoroughly tired out in body and mind, and fell straightway into a deep and dreamless slumber.

The next day was, after the rain, fine and sunny, with a blue sky flecked with banks of soft white and grey clouds, and a fresh breeze blowing which quickly dried up the moisture out of the wet earth.

Jack and Madge met, as it happened, quite simply and naturally and without any effort at all on either side. Madge had walked to the village after breakfast, with a message to the vicarage from her aunt, and she was returning slowly across the corn-fields just as Jack, bent on finding some small village lad to carry a note he had written to her, safely to the Hall, was making his way towards Fairley by the same path.

He saw her far off, coming towards him through the tall yellow corn that was "ripe well nigh unto harvest." He saw her indeed long before she saw him, for she was gathering the scarlet poppies as she came, and her eyes, beneath the shelter of her wide, white hat, were bent towards the field. He stood still to watch her coming, and it seemed to him as she came in her white dress, with its simple belt about her slender waist, and with swift, easy steps that swayed the slender figure as she walked, that there was not a flower in all the world, one half so fresh and sweet as she.

How could he have thought that other woman fair in comparison to her?

When she came quite close, so close that he stood but fifty yards away, suddenly she lifted her face and saw him. Then, indeed, her face was beautiful to see. A radiance of surprise and happiness broke in a flood from brow to chin, whilst the wide-opened eyes shone with a great delight and the parted lips uttered a cry of joy at the sight of him.

"Jack! Jack! is it really you?" The poppies and the cornflowers tumbled all together in a heap at their feet as the lovers' hands met again.

"My darling—what must you have thought of me!"

"Nothing, Jack. I know what happened. I heard it from Mr. Parker two days ago. I am so sorry for your trouble, and you were quite right to stay."

"But before you knew it, love? Were you not angry with me—did you not think me cruel to desert you without a word?"

"Angry—angry with *you*, Jack! Oh no! I only feared some evil thing had happened to you. I was sad, of course, but I knew you would come back to me."

Not a word of reproach or of doubt. Not even a question as to his doings. Decidedly Madge was different to all other women he had known. Her sweetness and her trust and belief in him touched him deeply. As they walked together through the yellow corn towards the woods he felt how unworthy he was to be loved by this true heart that was so unsuspicious and so unconscious of evil.

Her gentle sympathy with his loss, her trembling questions for his mother, seemed to bring out all the tenderness and womanliness of her nature. There was no thought of herself—it was all for him. Even when she said very softly:

"And, of course it was not the time, you could not speak to her of me?" it was less a question than an assertion which she made.

"No, I could not speak of you," he answered in a low voice, that, if she had only known it, was a voice of shame.

They had reached the woods and sat down together on a mossy bank, in the shade. Jack knew that he must speak to her now of what was in his mind. The time had come, and her last words had made an opening for him.

Still he hesitated. For a moment or two they neither of them spoke. Her hand was in his, and her sweet face was turned a little away.

There was a flush of happiness upon the smooth cheek, and love and content were in her clear, azure eyes. She was happy in the present, the future was as yet a blank to her; its storms and its dangers were all unknown.

Watching her furtively, he realised vaguely that if he spoke he would trouble the serene peace of that innocent soul, and a pang of remorse and of repentance for the first time struck across his soul. Should he leave her with her dreams and put off the evil hour?—should he first fight the battle out himself with her people and with his own?—should he go back to Miss Verinder and struggle out of the chains in which she held him, as honestly and as humbly as he could, owning his blunder and throwing himself upon her mercy? For a moment the conscience within him awoke and bade him do and dare this. But it was only for a moment, for he was not strong enough to bear the burden of his own mistakes and follies. He had neither the heart

nor the courage for such a desperate course, and so it seemed to him to be easier to shift the weight of it half on to her shoulders, so that she might suffer for his sins, and share with him that which he alone deserved to endure.

So he shut his ears to that small voice within which bade him be a man and spare her, and he fell back upon his own former arguments of inability to cope with his fate, and of powerlessness to resist the temptations that might assail him.

How little Madge guessed in those moments of silence how her whole future life lay trembling in the balance of fate ! How often she looked back to that hour, how many times in after days she stood alone upon that mossy slope beneath the beech trees, and saw the fields whitening in the sun, and the flowerets trembling in the breeze, and the winged things that darted by, and remembered that here it was that the spell of her love's sweet innocence had been snapped, and that the last moments of girlhood's unconscious peace had been spent ! Years after, she could see it all again and could hear, as though with her bodily ears, the voice of the man she loved as he said to her softly and tenderly :

“ Madge, do you think you could do a great thing for my sake, dear ? ”

CHAPTER XV.

MARRIED IN HASTE.

“ And when once the young heart of a maiden is stolen,
The maiden herself will steal after it soon.”

—MOORE.

OH ! the anguish of those storm-tossed days that followed !

In all the sorrows of her after life, Madge used to think that she never suffered quite in the same way as she suffered during that period of horrible uncertainty when she battled for the right against her own heart, and against the will of the man whom she loved.

For nothing could make her believe it to be right. Nothing could blind her to the truth, no arguments that he could use could convince her against the unerring instincts of her soul. There they were, those instincts--woman's supremest treasure--rooted in the heart of this girl whose bringing up had been but a perversion of nature, and whose teachings had only warped and hindered the development of her woman's being.

The old aunts in their foolishness had told her that all men were vile, and that in a single life only were peace and happiness to be found, but Madge's soul had, out of its innate honesty and rectitude, rejected that error as ignorant and

stupid ; yet with that rejection her mind had not at the same time loosed its hold upon the stronger safeguards of her sex.

If marriage were her right, she was prepared to do battle for that right. Her love had taught her the folly of her aunt's creed, and her common sense bade her choose the common lot of womanhood, in preference to that desolate and unblessed loneliness which they advocated. Yet that same common sense taught her also, that to marry secretly and in haste is unbecoming to the dignity of woman and unworthy of the cause which she was prepared to uphold.

It was but an instinct, but how strong, how holy is such an instinct, in the breast of a pure-souled woman !

It took Jack days to overcome it. And yet, in the end, he did overcome it, because love is the strongest thing of all in a woman's heart, and because, as she loved him, she could refuse him nothing.

One argument alone, indeed, had power to move her strongly. When he told her that by doing as he wished she would save him from a great danger, then her heart failed her, and she had asked him anxiously :

“What danger, Jack ?”

“The danger is one I cannot fully explain to you until you are my wife. It is enough for you to understand that it is a danger which threatens not only my happiness but even my very faith to you, which, unless you help me and come to me, may possibly divide me from you for ever ?”

“What is it ?” she asked again, her eyes wide with unknown terror.

“It must be enough for you to know, that there is a woman——”

“Ah !” the cry was one of the sharpest anguish and horror.

What she understood, or what she may have guessed, was in all probability very far wide from the truth, but the barest suggestion that any woman on earth might have the power of taking him from her was enough.

The nature that is strong for love is strong for jealousy as well. A blind terror lest another should take from her what was hers, and hers alone, overcame her—that last argument answered where all the others had failed.

The bulwarks gave way, and the fortress surrendered at discretion !

She consented.

“Let me at least tell Aunt Margaret,” she pleaded, as she yielded her sobbing self surrender upon his breast ; but the conqueror never has any mercy upon the vanquished, and besides, Aunt Margaret, although a half-hearted foe, was yet in the enemy's camp, and a person to be dreaded.

“ Nobody is to know,” he answered, flushed with the triumph of his victory, as he strained her to his heart. “ Nobody save Antonio, and the clergyman of the little country church miles away, where I shall take you to be married.”

After all, when once she had given way, there was something sweet and precious in the thought of this secrecy. It was as if—fond dream of lovers all the world over!—there was no one save their two selves on all the earth. It seemed to set them apart with each other, from the prying eyes and tongues of the rest of mankind! Stilling the voice within her, which had spoken in vain, Madge gave herself up to the joy of her lover’s gratitude and to the ecstasy of his caresses.

He was not minded to wait until she repented anew of her hardly won consent.

The days of her girlhood were numbered. On one of them he went up to Town to purchase the necessary license and to call upon Mr. Storey on his return journey. Then the little programme of their wedding-day was briefly arranged between them. It was easy for Madge to be absent from home for several hours together without attracting notice. The old lady had been unwell, Aunt Margaret spent much of her time in waiting upon her. The girl went and came as she pleased.

Soon, almost too soon, as it seemed to her, the morning dawned that was to be her bridal day.

Poor little lonely bride! There was not even any sunshine to welcome her with its warm kisses as she stole barefooted across her room and drew back the curtains of her window.

She threw open the casement and leant out. The gardeners were driving the mowing machine to and fro upon the lawn, and the scent of the fresh cut grass came up damp and fragrant upon the air, but the summer roses were all faded, and only the single dahlias held up their starry eyes to the dove-grey sky. A still, breezeless, sunless day, not a bird was singing, not a leaf stirred. There was a tinge of autumn upon the wooded hills across the river; the rains had drenched the greenness out of the trees, and there were streaks of brown and gold across their foliage. There was a certain sadness in the air, a vague foreboding of the cold chills of winter. Here and there a yellow leaf fluttered noiselessly to its death on the brown bosom of the weary earth. The summer was dying—dragging its tired steps slowly and sorrowfully to its appointed end.

Madge shivered a little as she turned back into her room. On a sofa at the foot of her bed lay a clean white cotton dress, and a straw hat which she herself had sat upstairs

trimming with white flowers half the day before. It was the whole of her wedding finery.

She dressed herself slowly and with care. When the gong sounded for breakfast she crept downstairs timidly and shamefacedly. Aunt Margaret's morning kiss made her feel like a guilty creature. She murmured the customary enquiry for her great aunt.

"She is much better to-day. She is getting up in fact, and will be downstairs in a moment. Sit down, Madge, and begin. What! no egg this morning? Will you have some fish then, or cold chicken?"

"I am not hungry, aunt," she stammered.

"My dear, are you not well? now I come to look at you, you are as white as your frock. I remember you were in all the afternoon yesterday, you should have gone out, it is enough to make you pale. You really must eat something, dear."

Madge gulped down some tea, and nibbled at a piece of toast.

The door was thrown open wide and the old lady, leaning on her gold-headed cane, came in. Her nieces rose to help her to her place.

Miss Durham began to talk angrily against some of the people. Carter, the bailiff had mismanaged the sale of the hay. Mrs. Gates had been short in her weekly quota of butter. Someone else had annoyed her about the cutting down of a particular tree, and worse than all, she had had a letter from that distant cousin who believed himself to be her heir, in which he had presumed to tender his advice unasked, concerning some new cottages that were being built!

Aunt Margaret, like some soft and gentle pussy cat, purred her soothing sympathy at requisite intervals, and listened with deepest interest to the tale of woe. But Madge could not listen at all. It all seemed so small, and petty, and foolish, compared to that tremendous thing which was about to happen to herself. Oh! if the old lady would only stop talking and finish her breakfast quickly, so that she might escape and end this horrible suspense.

"By-the-way, Margaret, have those wretched men not taken themselves and their horrid house-boat away yet?"

Madge started violently, and the colour rushed over her pale face. Lucky for her that her aunts were not looking at her!

"The gentlemen have gone away," answered Aunt Margaret. "I believe the house-boat is still there, but no one is on it."

"Ah, that is all you know about it, my dear. Wilson tells me he met one of those men in the village only yesterday.

What can induce them to remain so long in this neighbourhood?" And suddenly she put up her gold-rimmed glasses and glanced sharply at her younger niece. Madge, by this time, was white again with terror. She lowered her eyes into her plate and said nothing.

"There can be no attraction to fashionable young men in this quiet place, positively none!" continued Miss Durham with a certain angry asperity. "There is no society for them, and however much they may have pushed themselves, they have not, thank Heaven, succeeded in gaining an entrance into *this* house."

"Oh, aunt, they have not pushed!" escaped almost involuntarily from Madge.

"Don't contradict me, child. I tell you they *have* pushed. How should you understand the ways of these sly creatures? Look at the fire at the 'Gates', where they did all the mischief they could by interfering where they were not wanted."

"Oh, aunt, that is unjust."

"Do not interrupt me, Madge. I say it is so, and they had a mean motive no doubt, that of forcing me to take notice of them. Then, again, remember how they went once to church and stared us out of countenance! It is all part and parcel of the same business. They wanted to gain a footing here, but I am too wary to be deceived by them."

Madge bit her lips to stop the angry words that were eager to burst from them. She was no longer pale, but hot with indignation and her heart beat violently. Like a revelation it flashed across her, that this was what she would be condemned to endure for the future! This ignorant and wholesale abuse of him who would be her very self! She would have to sit still and listen, and never say a word lest she should betray her secret.

"Oh, I hope it won't be for long," she thought in her impotent dismay, "only for a few weeks, or a month at most, I trust!"

Alas, if she had only known!

But she had no one to counsel her or to hold her back from her destiny; no one to save her, or to open her eyes to that which she was about to do. There was only always that vague misgiving at the bottom of her heart, which it seemed to her now to be her duty to Jack, to stifle down and to ignore.

The Reverend Cyril Storey, with the parish clerk beside him, stood in his little ugly whitewashed church that morning and awaited the arrival of the wedding party. Of all those concerned in the matter, the Reverend Cyril was by no means the least nervous. Even whilst he was waiting

before they came, he felt horribly uncomfortable about the whole business. But when the musty country fly drew up at the outer gate and the little party of three descended and entered the porch, what he saw of them from the chancel railings, behind which he stood waiting, made him more uncomfortable still.

He had expected some pretty, country wench, surrounded, no doubt, by her low-born relations. The bride would probably be over dressed and hilarious, flushed with the triumph of being "made a lady of" and full of her own importance. He had pictured to himself at best, a farmer's daughter, well enough very likely for her station, but utterly unsuited to become the wife of Lord Castlemere's heir.

What he saw was certainly far better from one point of view, but it was infinitely more perplexing from another.

To begin with, there were no friends and relations, only one swarthy skinned, bearded man, who looked like a foreigner and was evidently a servant, and the bride walked up the aisle upon the bridegroom's arm.

Then, where was it that he had seen that slender girl with the quiet, sweet face before? Had not her graceful figure, whose every movement revealed her to be a lady, flashed by him now and again clad in cloth and mounted on a chestnut pony? Or was it on the river, plying her sculls, that he had seen her sometimes when he had gone as far as Fairley in his walks? That he had seen her before he was certain; he believed he had even enquired her name, but he had forgotten it. Who was she?

They came up the aisle together and stood before him. They were a good-looking couple, and Jack looked proud and happy, but Madge was as white as her dress, although her grave face was resolute and brave.

After a moment of hesitation Mr. Storey gulped down his misgivings, cleared his throat and began.

A runaway match—a ward in Chancery, it might be—a mésalliance, certainly not! It was too late to draw back. The service began.

When the clergyman asked "Who giveth this woman to this man?" Antonio answered glibly from the background, "I do, revered sare," and nodded his head and grinned as he said it, till all his white teeth glittered beneath his moustache.

So they two were made man and wife in that dreary little white-washed church in the parish of Cumpton-on-the-Hill; and plighted to one another those vows that are to last in sickness and in health, in wealth and in poverty, through life unto death.

Alas! how often those oaths so carelessly spoken are as lightly forswoin! How often does life and fate drive

roughshod across that sweet garden of hope, and ruin all the fair flowers of promise that bloomed so brightly at the outset but that wither and fade so soon ! Marriage is a thing too lightly undertaken. That is the secret, no doubt, of its innumerable failures. The youth and the maiden go smiling to the sacrifice, and neither of them comprehend in the very least the appalling immutability of the decree that is spoken above their heads. A summer dream of pleasant fancy and light-smiling love becomes, in one moment, the chain that can never be broken, a prison, or perchance a tragedy, that must hold them till the grave. And yet, never, never, never, does the experience of the thousands who have perished, warn back but one of that eager throng who are ever pressing forward, blindly and heedlessly to their doom.

It was a curious fact, that when she was actually married, when the gold ring that made her wife was on her finger, and all the vows of eternal truth, and constancy had been spoken—the first person that Madge Ludlow thought about, was not the handsome young husband with love in his brown eyes who stood by her side—but the grim old aunt at home, all of whose preachings and teachings she had so wilfully set aside.

“ Man is the cause of all the trouble in the world,” she seemed to hear again in the sharp, hard, old voice. “ The woman who desires to be happy must keep clear of him ; her only hope of happiness, is to shape her life without him.”

Why, oh why, did these sentences ring knell-like in her ears at such a moment?

They were in the vestry. Jack signed his name, and beneath it Madge wrote hers in trembling characters “ Margaret Durham.”

And then, of course, Cyril Storey knew, and a perfect shock of dismay smote him.

Young Miss Durham of Fairmead ! Fool ! thrice fool not to have known it !

Well, whatever he may have felt about it, it was too late to remonstrate now ! All he could do was to whisper earnestly to the bridegroom, “ Jack, you will tell her people, won’t you ? The old ladies, I hear, are very punctilious. You surely do not mean to carry her away like this, without putting yourself right with her aunts ? ”

Jack, in that moment of joy, could not listen to anything in the shape of serious advice. He pooh-poohed the whole thing.

“ It’s all right, my dear Storey. Don’t be uneasy. The old ladies think marriage wicked.”

“ Oh ! ”—looking rather shocked.

“ So we have taken the law into our own hands, that is all ! ”

"But you will, of course, tell them?" he urged again.

Jack was putting his wife into the fly. He only turned round and laughed.

"Many thanks, old fellow!" he cried, as Antonio jumped on the box, and the crazy looking vehicle drove off. "We are ever so much obliged to you for what you have done to-day."

And then Madge smiled and waved her hand back at him, and in a cloud of dust the little bridal party were carried away.

It was odd, an hour later, to find herself seated at luncheon in the gloomy dining-room at Fairmead Hall, with Aunt Margaret opposite, and Wilson, stealing about round the table, handing the vegetables.

Aunt Durham, over fatigued by her early rising, was lunching in her bedroom.

Aunt Margaret was telling her about it.

"You know she *would* do it, Madge, in spite of all I could say. Your Aunt Durham has such a spirit! However, it was just as I could have told her—twenty minutes after breakfast she came over quite faint, and I and Wilson almost had to carry her upstairs. She sent me away. I came down and looked for you everywhere, Madge; if you had not been in such a hurry this morning I could have gone out for a walk with you."

Madge shuddered.

"What are you going to do this afternoon?"

Madge's brain began to reel.

"I thought of riding," she gasped, mendaciously—Aunt Margaret could not ride.

"Oh, that is a pity! I thought we might have taken the dogs along the towing path, and had a look at that house-boat—it is certainly odd that she should still be lying empty in the same place. We might have gone and found out something."

"It is so damp by the river, Aunt Margaret," murmured poor Madge, almost incoherently.

"Well, perhaps it is. We will go another day, and, since you are going to ride, my dear, I think I will take Jane and the basket, and go and see my old women at the almshouses, there are the monthly doles to take to them."

Madge breathed again. The almshouses lay a long way from the river!

But she had to wait till Aunt Margaret was off and out of sight before she could dare to sally forth to keep her love tryst with her husband.

Then, at last, when all was safe and quiet, and the stillness of the slumbrous afternoon had fallen upon the old house in its gardens, how swiftly she sped forth through the shrubbery

walks, lest prying eyes should see her from the windows, and how breathlessly, at last, she stood on the river bank, where the *Naiad's* dinghy lay in the appointed place beneath the willows awaiting her !

“ Jack, Jack ! it is terrible ! ” she cried as he clasped her in his glad arms. “ How am I ever to go through it all—how am I to endure it ? ”

“ Only for a little while, my love, my own ! Only till my mother herself shall come and win you for me, from the dragons that keep you ! ” for that was how he had rashly promised her it should be.

When he was able to break what he had done to his mother, then she, of course, would take their part, and come in person to Fairmead, to soften the heart of old Miss Durham towards mankind in general, and towards Jack in particular.

And, until that happy consummation could be brought about, Madge was to keep the secret as best she could.

Well, as to the secret—it was very soon forgotten to-day.

Safe in the romantic seclusion of that dainty habitation, into which, save on that one occasion when Aunt Margaret had been with her, Madge had always steadfastly refused to set foot—safe, too, in the haven of the loving arms that held her close and pillow'd against the heart upon whose truth she had staked her life. Madge remembered no more the difficulties at home, and the terrible old lady whose laws she had broken and despised.

Antonio, keeping watch upon the upper deck, may have deemed the hours to be long and dreary, but assuredly to the lovers they sped only too swiftly away, for Love's wings are lightning freighted, and happiness cannot tarry in this wretched world.

Scarce has Joy time to touch our eager lips, ere his kiss is snatched away, and his flying footsteps are in haste to be gone, lest we should hold him too fast, and earth be haply turned to Heaven !

So to Jack and his young wife the golden hours of their honeymoon delight passed all too quickly away, and evening parted them once more. And yet there came a to-morrow to that day of bliss—and other “ to-morrows,” too, as sweet and fair.

It was a brief delirious dream of happiness, which, had they known it, was too deep, too wonderful to last !

One evening, as Jack's lips pressed their good-night kiss upon hers, Madge murmured, as she clung to him in the sweet *abandon* of a rapturous self-surrender :

“ My love, my own ! Oh ! Why should it not last for ever ? ”

"It shall last!" cried the passionate young lover as he strained her again and again to his heart. "It shall last! for ever and for ever!"

Alas! for lover's vows! It lasted exactly—one week!

CHAPTER XVI.

HURRIED EVENTS.

"Swift as a shadow, short as any dream,
Brief as the lightning in the collied night
That, in a spleen, unfolds both heaven and earth,
And ere a man hath time to say 'Behold!'
The jaws of darkness do devour it up:
So quick bright things come to confusion."

—SHAKESPEARE.

ONE day—it was destined to be the very last of these halcyon days of happiness—as Madge set foot upon the *Naiad*, Jack met her with a troubled face.

"My darling, I have dreadful news for you."

"Oh, Jack! What is it?"

"Madge, I must leave you!" he said as he gathered her to his breast.

"Leave me, Jack? Leave me?" she repeated bewilderedly, clasping her hand upon her heart to still its beating.

"It is terrible, Madge, but be brave, my sweet wife! I would give the world to stay here for ever, but I have a letter from my mother; she is ill, and she wants me. The letter has been sent on from my club in London: it is already two days old, and my mother is ill!"

"Of course, you must go," she answered, dully.

"You will be brave?"

"Oh, yes!" but it had not yet come home to her that he would have to go to-day. When he told her—when she saw that his portmanteau was already packed, and that Antonio was loosening the painter of the boat to convey him to the shore, then for a few moments it seemed to her as though life itself was over for her.

The unreasonableness and violence of her grief was such that Jack himself could not quite understand it. It was as though she was bidding him an eternal farewell.

"Why, my Madge, you must not take it like this! You must be my own brave girl! Why, silly little woman, it will only be for a few days—a week at the most! It will soon pass away, and then I shall be back again!"

But she only wept passionately upon his breast.

At her heart, something said to her in a voice that would not be silenced:

"It is the end ! it is the end ! The dream is over—the day is done, and the night of sorrow has come."

Foolish as the thought was, it was stronger than herself, and she could not stifle it.

But she would not grieve him by saying it.

With an effort she dried her tears, because she saw how much they distressed him. When he suggested, cheerfully : "Who knows, but that I may bring my mother back with me ?" She smiled, and tried to believe him—yet, somehow, at her heart she knew it would not be so. He seldom spoke of his people to her ; he had rarely even mentioned his mother ; his uncle never. His belongings were intangible, nameless shapes without identities in the background of her mind, and because she had him all for her own, she had not troubled herself about them. Now, for the first time she wished she had questioned him more concerning them.

"Courage, my little woman !" he cried, kissing her once more—"all partings are sad and hard, but this one cannot last long. Remember I went away before, and I came back to you, and this time there are fifty thousand more reasons why I should return as quickly as possible. And then, of course, I shall write."

"Yes, Jack—let us settle about that—where and how are we to write ?" The thought of a letter from him restored a little animation to her sad face.

"Why, of course, I will write here, to the *Naiad*, under cover to Antonio, and you will come here and fetch it—and I will tell you then, where to direct your answer. You had better not write till you hear from me."

And then the time was up and they had to part.

Jack helped her into her canoe, settled the cushions at her back and placed her paddle in her hands—then he jumped into the punt where Antonio and his portmanteau were already awaiting him. Soon the swirling water stretched between them, and presently she could see him striding across the field path towards the station, Antonio following him with his luggage. Still she sat there motionless in her tiny craft, shading her eyes with her hand from the sun, and straining them to see the last of him. And presently, at a turn of the path, he turned and looked back and waved his hand in a last farewell to her, ere the hedgerow hid him from her tear-blinded sight.

Then she knew she should see him no more, and very, very sadly she paddled down stream again alone.

And ever and again that voice in her heart kept saying, "It is the end. The day of joy is over, the time for sorrow has come. I have done wrong, and my punishment must be borne. He has left me !"

And no arguments either of reason or of affection were

sufficient to banish that voice of foreboding, that rang its knell-like notes over and over again with persistent reiteration in her heart.

Meanwhile Jack, with a considerable turmoil in his mind, was nearing Castle Regis. Just as when he had left it, in proportion as the miles between it and him increased, so did home influences decrease upon him. So now, as he left Fairley and its summer Idyll behind, and drew nearer and nearer to his home, the influences of that home came back stronger and stronger upon him, and Madge's hold upon him became fainter and more unreal.

There are some natures, and Jack's was one of them, upon which absence and presence wield a most extraordinary and disproportionate power. Impulsive, and easily carried away by the faintest breeze of any strong feeling, Jack was always unable to foretell of himself what currents might not move him hither and thither, when he found himself subjected to them. His affections, above all things, were most easily swayed, and the tortures of uncertainty which he constantly underwent, did but obscure his judgment and render him an easy prey to any complication of circumstance that might assail him.

Thus, when he read his uncle's letter, as he journeyed homewards, and realized that his mother had been attacked by several alarming fainting fits, that the family doctor was seriously alarmed, and had requested that Sir Augustus Rolls might be sent for from London, he felt himself to have been a brute for not having flown sooner to her bedside, and told himself that nothing on earth—not even Madge—should have come betwixt him and her.

His love appeared to him to be a pleasure, to be pursued as occasion permitted; whilst his sacred duty to his widowed mother seemed for the moment to be paramount, and to come before all else on earth.

It dismayed him to think that twenty-four precious hours had been wasted whilst the letter had followed him from London to Fairley, during which his mother might be worse, and had probably been longing for him to arrive.

When he got to Castle Regis, he sprang eagerly from the dog-cart which had been sent to meet him at the station and his uncle met him in the hall.

"Thank God, Jack, that you have come!" he exclaimed, as he grasped his hand, "we have been wanting you badly."

"She is not worse?"

"No, she is much better, but there is a great deal to be done. Come in here; how is it you did not come yesterday?"

"I was away. I did not get the letter till this morning I came at once," he explained as he followed Lord Castle mere into his study.

"Your mother is in her room. She is up, on the sofa ; you shall see her presently. But I want to tell you about her first. You know we had Sir Augustus ?"

"Your letter told me so."

"Well—I am thankful to say that in some ways he gives us a better report of her than I had dared to hope. But her whole constitution is in a very feeble state. There is no actual disease, but there is a lack of vitality which might very easily turn to something more serious ; her heart is weak, her chest is weak. The slightest chill might prove not only dangerous but actually fatal, in her present state ; in fact, her whole system is so shaken and upset, that although there is no cause for actual alarm, there is every cause for the gravest anxiety. The upshot of it all is, that she must not remain in England for the winter ; she is to go to Algeria at once, and you must go with her, my boy."

The room seemed to swim round with him, for a moment he could see nothing clearly.

"I, uncle ?" he managed to falter at last, "can I be of sufficient use to her ? Would it not be better if you could go ? I might join you later," he added feebly.

"No, Jack. I cannot go," replied Lord Castlemere gravely—he was thinking of that old story which had been gossiped about, that he had loved Lady Mary better than her husband had done. He had thought of this, and he had decided that it would be better that her son, and not himself, should be her escort. "I cannot go, Jack. You are the proper person to be with her."

Jack knew that he was.

"I suppose, when you say 'at once,' you mean in about a fortnight or so ?" he asked, and his mind going back to Madge and what he should do about her, and how she would take it.

"When I say 'at once' I mean 'at once' my boy. You will have to leave England on Saturday."

"Impossible, uncle—why, to-day is Wednesday !"

"Not in the least impossible. I have set everything in readiness. Remember that every day's delay is an additional day of danger for your mother. Sir Augustus was most emphatic in his orders that there should be no postponement. If another fainting attack were to come on, she would be thrown back anew, and unable to travel for perhaps another week after it. Now she is better, and we must take advantage of the improvement and start her off at once. I have already put things in train—I have, through the help of Mrs. George Verinder, found a travelling maid, who is to arrive to-night, and I have written to Paris for a *coupé lit* for Saturday, and a courier will meet us in London on Friday evening. What you must do is to go up to Town to-morrow

morning and arrange everything, and take rooms at a quiet hotel for us for Friday evening, and I shall bring her up to London myself, and see you off. Sir Augustus will pay her another visit on Friday evening in Town, and then we shall get her off on Saturday morning from Charing Cross."

"I hardly know how I can be ready so soon!" demurred Jack bewilderedly.

"You *must* be ready," answered his uncle, with a slight frown. "Why, it may be a matter of life and death to your mother—don't you understand me, Jack? You will have all to-morrow and Friday in Town to make your own arrangements and pack your things——"

"I ought to go down to see after that houseboat——"

"Oh, there will be no difficulty about that. I will telegraph to Staines to the builder; he will send up for her and lay her up for the winter, and take charge of everything. By-the-way, where is that Italian servant of yours? Do you want to take him with you?"

"No—he would be useless," answered Jack quickly, with a sudden flush. To bring Antonio and his secret, which he alone knew, into contact with Lady Mary and her servants, would be too great a risk to run. "He is only of use on the river," he went on to explain, "the stupidest fellow alive in any other place. I shall give him a month's wages and let him go."

"Then, as you will want a servant, had you not better take Thring? Poor fellow! he wishes to remain with us; he spoke to me about it yesterday."

Thring had been poor Colonel Ludlow's valet. Jack agreed because he could think of no possible objection to make, but he felt like a helpless fly caught in the small meshes of an unbreakable web. Thring, who had known him from his babyhood, was the sort of respectable, conscientious-minded individual to whom a young man could never, by any possibility, venture to make confidences; if he did but request him to post a letter to an unknown lady, Thring was capable of taking the letter first to Lady Mary to know if it was all right.

"The only thing that troubles me on your account, my dear boy," then said his uncle with some feeling, "and indeed it grieves and distresses me beyond measure, and excites my deepest sympathy with you, is that your marriage will have to be put off."

"My marriage!" for a moment Jack really could not imagine what Lord Castlemere meant, and it took him quite a couple of seconds before Agnes Verinder and her claims upon him—now rendered so powerless—returned to his memory. Then, somewhat to his uncle's surprise, he laughed shortly.

"Oh, that will be all right, uncle ! I mean—" catching the look of blank amazement on the old man's face—"I mean, of course, that that is a minor consideration compared to my mother's health."

Now here, if he had known it, was a fine opportunity for Jack to make to his uncle and guardian, that free and candid confession of his transgression, which, we are assured, is highly beneficial to the soul.

He might have said : "Forgive me, uncle, and help me out of a scrape. I do not love Miss Verinder, and I cannot marry her, because I am already married to someone else whom I do love."

But he said nothing of the sort. It never, in fact, came into his head to say it. What he did think was that anyhow this was a reprieve, that as he couldn't marry Agnes ostensibly on account of Lady Mary's health and his own absence from England, it was quite on the cards that she would throw him over and take up with somebody else in the interval, which would render his own position much more comfortable and avert all the trouble and bother of owning to the truth. For the present, at any rate, nothing need be said to his mother, or to Lord Castlemere.

"I should recommend you to see Agnes when you are in Town," continued his uncle ; "she has returned to Hans Place, and she is such a dear, good girl and so devoted to your mother that, of course, she will take it sensibly and sweetly, besides, she knows already, as Sir Herbert was here this morning, and he had written to her. Perhaps though you have seen Agnes ?"

"I did not know she was in Town," he answered evasively. "Can I not see my mother now ?"

When he did see her, her delicate pallor and the dark lines round her large brown eyes that were so sad and pathetic, moved him to the very depths of his heart. Oh, yes, for certain he must go with her ! There could be no doubt of his duty to her. His mother must come first, and Madge would have to trust him and wait. Other wives had waited before now—others had had husbands in the Navy and in the Army, whose duty had carried them far away from their loving arms, and they had had to stay at home and wait, and pray, for their safe return. So it would have to be with Madge and himself. She was brave and good, and she would trust him, even as he would trust her, and she would wait on quietly at her home for him, till he was able to come back and claim her.

But, of course, in his mother's present frail state of health, there could be no question of breaking the news of his marriage to her.

The secret would have to be kept.

The worst of it was, that it was absolutely and utterly impossible that he could go down to Fairley to wish her good-bye between this and Friday evening, when he was to meet his mother and uncle in Town. He would have his own preparations to make, and his packing, and the time and the trains would not admit of his going there and back in a day.

On his way up to London, however, he thought of a plan by which he could see her and wish her good-bye. It would not be very difficult for her to meet him at the Junction, where he could run down by the morning express on Friday—they could spend an hour together in the waiting-room there, and he could return to Town by the afternoon fast train, which would bring him back in time to join his mother and uncle at their hotel in the evening. He looked out the trains by which she would have to come and found that it would be quite possible for her, by making some trivial excuse to her aunt, to be absent for the necessary three hours or so, without attracting suspicion.

He determined to write to her as soon as he got to London and instruct her to do this. There was another letter too, which Jack began to realise that in common honesty he must write before he went abroad—a letter which would be exceedingly unpleasant to him to indite, but concerning which, even his easy-going conscience began, by this time, to trouble him disagreeably. It would be easier too, he believed, to write an evasive and prettily-worded letter to-day than to have to make a humiliating verbal explanation in four months' time.

Agnes Verinder was a woman of the world ; she would perhaps understand him and make allowances for him, and absence would probably cure her passion—real or pretended—for a man whose conduct and treatment of her had scarcely been that of a devoted lover.

When Jack got to London the next day, the first thing he did was to drive to his club in order to sit down and write these two important letters.

It was the empty time of the year. His own club, the Junior Carlton was closed for repairs ; the Carlton had opened its hospitable doors to its homeless neighbours.

Jack had some difficulty in finding a disengaged writing-table. Another man, a stranger to him, civilly made room for him at the corner of his, and he sat down. He addressed a couple of envelopes, one to Antonio Scarpi, Houseboat *Naiad*, Fairley, the other to Miss Verinder, 72, Hans Place, and having gone through this necessary prelude he proceeded to write his two letters. They were both difficult to compose, and took him some time to think over. The first, especially, seemed to bother him exceedingly, for he tore up

several abortive attempts before he managed to turn out a letter to his satisfaction. At length, however, he completed his task, and read both letters carefully over before putting them into their respective coverings. He was on the point of doing this when a hand struck him on the shoulder and a voice behind him exclaimed :

"Why, Jack, old man! I had no idea you were up in Town!"

Jack jumped up and found himself grasping hands with Lance Parker.

"Have you done your letters? Come into the smoking-room and have a jaw. Is it true you are going abroad?"

"Wait half a moment, Lance." He turned back to the table. There was a little confusion in his manner. He stood rather carefully between Lance and the table, and shuffled his letters hurriedly into the envelopes, keeping them face downwards in his hand so that Lance should not inadvertently catch sight of the directions.

Not that for a moment he suspected his friend of prying into his correspondence, but because a guilty conscience naturally makes cowards of us all, and that we always fear to be found out when we are doing anything we desire to keep secret.

Then he went out into the hall, dropped his letters into the box and followed his friend into the smoking-room.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE TWO LETTERS.

"Then black despair,
The shadow of a starless night, was thrown
Over the world in which I moved alone."

—SHELLEY.

MEANWHILE Madge had spent two very sad days by herself at Fairley.

An inexpressible gloom weighed upon her, the burden of a death-like loneliness oppressed her. She knew that she had no right to be so miserable, and yet she was unable to shake off her ever-increasing misery.

In vain she told herself that Jack loved her and that he was bound to her. That she was his wife, and that he had sworn to return to her as quickly as he could, and that for his own sake alone it was highly improbable that he would remain away from her one hour longer than was absolutely necessary. In spite of these arguments a presentiment of some vague evil seemed to crush down her soul with a leaden weight, and always the same terrible conviction came back to her with a dreadful persistence—the conviction that her happiness was over.

By Friday morning, however, a little hope returned to her, for she remembered that he had promised to write, and, as there had been no letter yesterday, most certainly she would receive one to-day.

Too impatient to go down to the boat-house and up by the river to the *Naïad*, she ran across the fields as soon as she had swallowed a hasty breakfast, and flew, with light footsteps along the tow-path, until she reached the house-boat.

How slow Antonio was in answering to her call, and how long it seemed before he brought the punt over to the shore and gave her precious letter into her hands !

And even then she could not open it before Antonio. Her love's first letter was something too sacred and too sweet not to be enjoyed in secret—far from all human eyes. Clasping it against her breast, she waved him a hasty adieu, and ran back towards a little coppice through which she had come on her way. Here, by the stile that led into the corn-field, where the wheat had all been carried only yesterday, beneath a shelter of hazel bushes and young larches, and a tangle of briar and withering bracken, Madge sank upon the ground, and tore open the envelope that was addressed to Antonio—for Antonio, who could not read, had not even broken the seal—and in a moment more the sheet of paper inside was unfolded, and her eager eyes rivetted upon the handwriting which she had never seen before. The treasured letter was her own at last !

She looked at it, tremblingly at first—then more steadily—after a moment curiously—then with utter bewilderment ! The glad, rosy flush faded slowly from her cheeks, and the happy light died out of her eyes. She put up her hand with a puzzled movement to her head, and a long, troubled line of perplexity puckered her forehead. What sort of a letter was this ? What did it mean ? Why did it begin so oddly ?—or, rather, why did it not begin at all ? She turned it over and over in her hands—half a sheet of loose paper wrapped round it, inside the envelope, bore the inscription, “For Mrs. Ludlow”—her own name, written for the first time ! It sent, once more a little thrill through her heart as she looked at it. It was undoubtedly her letter, yet in what a strange way it opened.

Then, with a little tightening of her lips, she set to work and read it slowly through, from the first word down to the very last. And this was the letter which the young husband had sent to his ten days' wife :

“ How am I to make my confession to you, or own to you how terribly I have offended against you ! I know that you will never forgive me, and I do not deserve your forgiveness.

I can only ask you to forget me and not to curse me if you can help it. That little summer dream between us must be forgotten, for when I was mad enough to be led away by your beauty, I was not free to make love to you, and I had no right to take the kisses you were good enough to give me. I am tied elsewhere, and my heart belongs to another woman, who has a prior claim upon me. Do not hate me more than you can help. I make no excuses for myself, only perhaps you will remember that you are very lovely and very fascinating, and that I am very weak, and yes, perhaps too, that you turned my head a little by your evident preference for me.

“I don’t wish to be ungenerous, but I do think that, in your quiet moments, you will own that you led me on a little. Anyhow I know I have behaved like a brute to you, and you have every right to be very angry with me. I don’t think, however, that you will break your heart for my unworthy self. I am going abroad at once—the day after to-morrow. Who can say how long I may be out of England, or when we may meet again. ‘It may be for years and it may be for ever.’ That will probably depend upon how soon you can bring yourself to forgive me. Anyhow, our little history can be kept quiet, as nobody has heard of it yet but ourselves, so that I have done you no injury as regards the world. Will you try and forgive me, and when I come back, will you treat me still as a friend ?

“Your very penitent and remorseful,
“JACK.”

From the first word down to the very last she read it through ; not once, nor twice, but many times over. At first she read on blindly and vaguely, as one who spells out a foreign language but dimly understood, but little by little the cruel words began to stand out vividly, and to cut and to scourge. She realised the hollow repentance, the shallow mockery of regret, the covered insult of the accusation that she had led him on, and the flippancy of the final request that in time to come she might regard him “as a friend.” What she did not realise was the meaning of it all.

What was this horrible nightmare of a letter, out of which two terrible things reared themselves, dragon-like, on end, and stared with awful eyes into her face ?—that he had been tied to another woman before he knew her, and that he was going abroad to-morrow !

She was not his wife ! And he was going to desert her ! Then she remembered, that in order to persuade her to marry him, he had on one occasion told her of another woman who might stand between them. Was this what he had meant ?

For a moment she raised her white rigid face towards the cloud-flecked heavens above her, for a moment her pale lips gasped for breath—then all at once the sky turned black, and the sun became blotted out, and all the fair things of earth were no more, and she fell forward upon her face on the moist moss-grown path, and knew nothing.

How long she lay there she never knew. It might have been only a few minutes, it might have been hours.

When at last consciousness came back to her, and she struggled slowly into a sitting posture, her first rational thought was a bitter regret that the blow had not killed her.

The letter was still grasped tightly in her hands that were all stained and soiled with the damp earth upon which she had fallen, her eyes fell upon the crumpled paper and a long shuddering moan broke from her.

It was true then!—it was no dream! Love, truth, honour and happiness—these were the dreams, the phantasmagorial shadows which had spread their wings and flown away—but this horrible thing—this letter which destroyed them all, remained to her, and was real—the only real thing in life!

Slowly and painfully she dragged herself to her feet, like some broken flower that has trailed its sweetness in the mud. There were no tears in her eyes, and she uttered no cry of despair, only she was white and wan; there was neither life nor light in her eyes, and the freshness of her young beauty was for the moment tarnished, so that a stranger would scarcely have thought her pretty, and a friend might scarcely perhaps have recognized her. So surely does mental suffering extinguish the loveliness which happiness and light-heartedness above all else, can paint upon a woman's face.

She got herself home somehow. She was not conscious of any great amount of pain; once or twice indeed she caught herself wondering why she felt it so little, or whether indeed she cared so very much.

He was gone, she said to herself, that was all! She would begin the old life again, the life she had lived before she knew him. It was all quite simple—there would be nothing new about it. She was just Madge Durham again—Madge Ludlow had never existed, save in a feverish dream that was over. She would go back to the old days.

Ah, no! never, never more! For even as the thought was in her mind, with a wild pang of agony her soul awoke to the certainty that the old days of innocence and ignorance could never, never, be renewed! For how can the woman who has tasted of the tree of knowledge, who has loved and who has suffered, ever go back to the spotless whiteness of her virginal years? or ever conjure back the dreamless freshness of her childhood? Can what is

eternally lost be found again? or a ruined faith be made whole?

As she neared the house she saw that old Miss Durham was seated upon the lawn. She had been drawn out in her wheel-chair, and sat basking in the mild autumnal sunshine.

"Madge! Madge, my love!" called out the old voice to her as she approached. "Come to me, dear child. I see nothing of you now."

She came as she was told, and stood close to her great-aunt's chair.

"You are always on the river, my dear."

"I shall not go any more, Aunt Durham," she answered in a strange still voice.

"Well, I am glad of that. I think too much rowing makes you pale. You are very pale to-day, Madge. You do not look well."

"I am very well, Aunt Durham."

"You do not look so. You must go for more rides, and leave the damp river alone. Have those horrid men gone yet from that house-boat?"

"Yes, they have gone away." How oddly quiet her words sounded even to her own ears. But the old woman seemed to notice nothing.

"Oh, well, I am glad of that. I can't bear men hanging about. They were after no good I daresay. Men never are. Nasty, sly, deceitful creatures! Keep clear of them, Madge, all your life long, and then you will be happy. Keep clear of them! they always bring trouble."

Was not Aunt Durham right after all? and were not her words of warning words of truest wisdom? Alas, alas! why had she turned a deaf ear to her teaching and believed herself to be wiser than her teacher!

Aunt Durham was right, and she was wrong. Could there be any doubt about that now?

So Madge went no more upon her beloved river, but kept at home with her aunts, following Aunt Margaret to the village upon her errands of charity, or sitting quietly by Aunt Durham's armchair, holding her skeins of wool, and listening the while patiently and silently to her diatribes upon her favourite theme. And ever the girl grew paler and thinner, and stiller, smiling seldom—laughing never—like a flower that is slowly withering away for lack of sunshine.

But the old aunts said nothing; and the silent days slipped away uneventfully, one after the other.

Now it so happened that a few hours only before the day upon which Madge's young life had gone shipwreck by the reading of that terrible and incomprehensible letter, another letter, almost as strange and to the full as bewildering, had

been received and read by a certain handsome young lady in a certain house in Hans Place, where the postman had duly delivered it about four o'clock in the afternoon.

In this instance there had been no flutterings of joy at the sight of an unknown handwriting. Agnes was perfectly familiar with Jack's scrawling autography, having read most of his letters to his mother ever since his schooldays, in addition to several little notes which he had at divers times on sundry trivial topics penned directly to herself. When Jack's letter therefore, together with three others, was handed to her on a silver tray by the footman she merely said to herself: "From Jack, at last!" and laid it down face downwards by her side upon the table, after which she proceeded to open the other three. The first, from her dress-maker, promised to interest her the most, her new ball-dress was to be finished to-morrow, would Miss Verinder kindly call about twelve o'clock and settle whether she would have the *garniture* of water-lilies or that of brown chrysanthemums draped across the front? both should be ready for her inspection, etc., etc. Miss Verinder pondered over this letter a good deal, biting her full under-lip with her white teeth and debating the pros and cons very carefully within herself, for the dress was for a country ball in Yorkshire at which she expected to meet Major Lawley, and she was naturally anxious to look her best.

"Brown chrysanthemums, I *think!*" she murmured pensively, half-aloud. "More uncommon and better suited to the season; brown on pale coral pink, yes very good taste I think. That is, if the flowers are good ones. I must see them myself, of course."

Then she turned to the next letter. This was a bill from her bootmaker, it was unexpectedly high, and with an angry frown she tore it in half and threw it into the fire, an easy and summary way of dismissing it from her mind.

She coloured a little as she opened the third letter, for there was a certain very familiar club crest upon the envelope. It was a mere note, but it pleased her and made her smile, for it was to tell her that Major Lawley would come and see her at tea-time to-day.

"Now, pray Heaven poor dear Jack doesn't want to come and wish me good-bye at the very same time!" murmured Agnes to herself, as she took up Jack's letter the last, "for I shall certainly have to put Hugh Lawley off if he does. I can't let them clash. Oh, dear, what a lucky thing for me it is that Lady Mary has to winter abroad, and that my dear Jack has to go with her! A letter once a week full of pretty sentences will keep the poor dear boy quite happy and content, and, meanwhile, I can have all my fun this winter and pay my country visits, and have no end of a good

time ! Now I wonder what my Jack has got to say to me, he is not certainly a very ardent lover, but that is all the better for me. He would bore me very much if he were."

She took the letter out of the envelope. It was long and closely written, and she smiled a little at the beginning which, as if to disprove her words, was most orthodoxly lover-like.

—MY OWN DARLING—For you are my own, my very own now, and nothing can take you from me." ("Hum ! not so sure of that, my young friend !" muttered Agnes to herself). "I have terrible news for you—my mother is very ill and is ordered abroad at once for the winter, and although it half breaks my heart to think of leaving you, yet it is undoubtedly my duty to go with her."

"All this is stale news, Jack. As if I didn't know."

"I am so bewildered by the suddenness of it all that I hardly know what I am writing. And I am so wretched, too, for the time also is so short that I shall only have time for a most hurried good-bye."

"Hurrah ! that's a mercy !" ejaculated Miss Verinder, heartlessly.

"Darling, what *will* you say to me when I tell you that I cannot come down to wish you good-bye, but you must meet me for an hour at the Junction to-morrow."

Here Agnes sat bolt upright and frowned.

"*Meet him at the Junction !* What *can* he mean ? He must be mad !"

"I have looked out all the trains for you ; if you will come by the 11.40, I shall come down from Town and be on the platform to meet you, and we can have an hour together in the waiting-room. I can then tell you everything and we can settle everything together——"

At this point Agnes began turning the letter over and over in her hands in a puzzled and agitated manner.

She snatched up the envelope and examined it closely. It was clearly addressed to herself, but this did not delude Miss Verinder, because she was a young woman of the world and quite "up to everything," as she would have told you, connected with its ways and its wickednesses. And the very first reflection which came into her mind, was that the letter was certainly not intended for ~~herself~~.

"He has put it into a wrong envelope," she cried. "What a piece of fun! It's meant for—well, for—somebody else! Oh my goodness! and *this* is our dear, good boy, Jack, who, according to his mother, never had a naughty thought in his life! Oh, dear, oh, dear, who would have believed it? This really is most entertaining! Let us see what he says to this wretched creature," and without any further scruple she proceeded to read the letter right through to the end, giving vent to sundry chuckles of amusement and excitement as she did so.

"You will, of course, my darling," continued this ill-fated letter, "go on living quietly at home. Our secret must now be kept religiously till my return. Now don't be offended with me, but I am going to make you accept a regular allowance from me. It is quite right that I should provide for you, and you must not let any sentimental feelings stand in the way of my doing what I know to be right. I should like to feel, in case of any trouble or worry from your people at home, that at least you have plenty of money. I will arrange all about this when I see you to-morrow, and also we must settle about letters—how I am to write to you, and also I will give you my address which I hardly can tell you now—"

Here the letter broke off somewhat abruptly with a smudge of ink and below it was scrawled :

"I am interrupted and must end. I shall see you to-morrow. Keep up a good heart.

"Ever my dearest and best, your own loving
"JACK.

When Agnes Verinder had finished down to the very last word, she deliberately turned the letter round and round and read it all over again from the very beginning.

It was with rather a vicious laugh, that after doing so, she folded it up and put it carefully back into its envelope; and her dark eyes shone with a glitter which was not altogether angelic.

"So, my friend, Jack," she said aloud, in a little hard rasping voice, "you are not the immaculate *preux chevalier* which your fond family believes you to be after all! A very nice little discovery your stupidity has put into my hands, and a very useful little card to keep in reserve, I shall no doubt find it some day. This letter must decidedly be kept, friend Jack, oh yes, and very carefully kept too; it may come in extremely useful by and bye. The little lady in the country, to whom you are going to make such a

nice comfortable allowance whilst you are away will cry her pretty eyes out, no doubt, for you and for your quarterly cheques ! I wonder, by the way, what my dear Jack has said to *me* in the letter which she must, no doubt, have received instead of this effusion ? nothing so affectionate and loving as this 'I'll be bound ! It really is too comical ! This charming love-letter must be locked up forthwith with my diamond stars, it is quite as valuable to me, and some day will, no doubt, be twice as useful."

'Then she got up and rang the bell.

"Is Mrs. Verinder out, James ?"

"Yes, miss, she said you was not to wait tea for her."

"Very well. Bring up tea when Major Lawley calls, not before ; and James——"

"Yes, miss."

"I am not at home to anyone else remember, not *anyone* on any pretence whatever. If anybody should want to see me particularly, they can call again *after* seven. I shall see nobody but Major Lawley before that hour."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SHADOW OF THE TROUBLE.

"The melancholy days are come,
The saddest of the year,
Of wailing winds, and raked woods,
And meadows brown and sere."

BRYANT.

THE summer was over, and grey winter held the earth in his chilly grasp. The old river rushed turgid and sullen between his banks, the leafless willows dragged their sodden branches into the stream, the dank mists lay upon the half-flooded, meadows and curled coldly up the hill sides, where the skeleton branches clashed drearily against each other in the bare and lifeless woods.

There was no frost. It was not very cold, only it was damp, and dank, and dreary. Sometimes it rained steadily for days together, and sometimes when the rain was over, a soughing wind sighed and sobbed unceasingly amongst the tree tops, or sometimes again it was only still, and grey, and intensely silent, as though death itself brooded over the land.

The old red house in the Fairley meadows was silent too. There were no flowers in the garden, no mowers whetting their scythes across the lawns, no gay striped sunblinds in the tall windows. But for the lines of pale blue smoke ascending lazily from its twisted red brick chimneys, the house might have been deserted and empty.

And yet, within these silent walls, a tragedy—yea, a very

tragedy of human misery—was slowly but surely beginning its appointed course ; and the first scenes of a fate, cruel and remorseless as the grave, were almost imperceptibly playing themselves out.

Not a word had been spoken ; not a sign had been made.

The three women lived together, as heretofore ; there was no outward change in their conditions of life, and yet, beneath the surface, already the change had come to them.

Old Miss Durham was the least altered of the three. She was a little older, and a little more infirm than last winter. She rose a little later in the day, retired to rest a little earlier, leant a little more heavily on the hands that helped her backwards and forwards to her chair. Yet the sharp tongue had lost none of its acerbity, and the old lessons against nature and happiness were preached with the same fervour, and the old family sayings and stories told again and again, with undiminished emphasis and credulity. Yet, even to her, the change had come.

Every now and then the sharp old eyes would glitter with a strange light as she watched her young niece come and go, and there was a cunning gleam in them as they followed her, which surely was a new thing.

Often there was even a covert malice in the old woman's glance, and sometimes a little smile of cruel triumph played momentarily upon the thin yellow lips.

The tragedy as yet was perhaps no tragedy to old Miss Durham—only a puppet show, of which she fancied that she held the strings.

But what of the other two women ?

What of Aunt Margaret, whose gentle soul scarce dared to face the horror of that terrible thing which daily forced itself with awful conviction, more and more upon her mind ?

And what of Madge, who with pale shrunken cheeks and lack-lustre eyes crept like a guilty creature about the long empty staircases, or crouched huddled up in some distant corner of the large rooms, pretending to pore over some open book whose page was never turned, and shrinking back into her corner with sudden hot blushes if either of her aunts spoke suddenly to her, or summoned her to their side ?

And this went on for days and days, and for weeks and weeks. Always the same restraint, the same strange "something" that brooded like an evil thing in the quiet old house—a something which, little by little, blighted the once bright and blooming girl, and changed her into a stricken, haggard-eyed woman, whilst the aunt who loved her much, was eating out her heart with a miserable but unspoken fear, and the aunt who loved her but little, fancied that she held the trump cards, and had fought successfully against the foe that threatened them all.

In these days, Wilson, the old butler, held more than one secret confabulation with his lady, and many were the mysterious whisperings that sometimes took place between them.

It was a dreary wet morning towards the end of December; the rain drove monotonously and steadily against the window panes, the lawn was a pool of water, the distance was blotted out in mist. Old Miss Durham sat by the fire in the morning-room upstairs. Miss Margaret, at this hour, was interviewing the cook, and Madge—who could tell where Madge was? probably alone, nursing her wretchedness, and weeping unseen in her own room.

Miss Durham glanced up at the clock. It was eleven o'clock—the time when the letter bag was brought up daily from the village, by a lad whose special business it was to fetch it.

Wilson kept the key of the bag safely hidden in a drawer in his pantry; when the letters came, he unlocked it and sorted the servants' letters out, and then took all the rest upstairs to his mistress.

Presently he came in, bearing the letters on a silver salver.

"There's another on 'em," he remarked, as Miss Durham, fitting her gold spectacles on to the bridge of her aquiline nose, took the letters all together off the salver, "another of them furrin' letters for Miss Madge."

There it lay, in its thin envelope, with its queer looking foreign stamps, addressed in a large, bold, masculine hand-writing :

" Miss Madge Durham,
Fairmead Hall,
Fairley,
Angleterre."

There could be no possible doubt as to whom it was intended for, and yet Miss Durham gathered it up jealously in her left hand, whilst she turned over the rest of the correspondence lightly with her right.

"These are for Miss Margaret," she remarked, after she had scrutinized each in turn curiously and cautiously. "You can put them on her davenport, Wilson."

"Yes, mum," then Wilson stooped down to make up the fire. "I suppose it's from the same place, that letter for Miss Madge, mum?" he observed, casually, as he lingered over the coal scuttle. "That makes the third on 'em. It's really *hawful*!"

"Yes, it must stopped, Wilson. I must put an end to it," answered the old lady with a frown, as she tore open the foreign envelope, and extracted the letter.

"Dear, dear ! to think of the wickedness of them gentlemen !" murmured Wilson, sympathetically.

"You may well say so, Wilson ! However, providentially, no harm has been done—if it were not for my prudent habit of always inspecting the letters when they arrive, Miss Madge might have actually received and read these unprincipled effusions. Luckily, however, she knows nothing of them."

"Miss Madge do look peaky and poorly, mum," remarked the old servant, parenthetically.

"She's fretting, Wilson, that's all. She is fretting a bit. They will at first. Miss Margaret did, if you remember. It is a very small matter. Nothing to what might have been her fate if this miserable man's letters had been allowed to fall into her hands, and he had perhaps enticed her away from home ! She will soon get over it. It is for her ultimate happiness, Wilson."

"I 'ope so, mum, and I suppose there's no doubt it's one of them gents as was here in the summer, in that there barge thing?"

"Not a doubt of it, Wilson. I always suspected they were up to no good, from the day they came to church. There must have been some motive in *that* ! And Miss Madge was allowed to go too much on the river alone last summer—another year I must stop it. They must have struck up some sort of acquaintance with her, and these impudent letters are the result ! However, I am quite determined to put an end to the nuisance, once and for all. I shall answer this letter, Wilson, and in such a fashion as to silence this gentleman for ever. There will not be any more letters after I have written to him," she added, grimly.

"I am sure you are perfectly right, mum."

"Now you may go. The fire will do very well—it is too large as it is. Leave the room, Wilson, and take Miss Margaret's letters down to her."

Wilson, who was devoured by curiosity, would have dearly loved to have read the letter himself. He felt it somewhat hard to be treated only to half-confidences. However, upon this summary dismissal, there was nothing left for him to do but retire, which he proceeded to do, slowly and unwillingly, peeping over his lady's head as he went towards the door, and trying to get a glimpse of the purport of the letter which she was just beginning to read. Wilson felt sure it would have interested him very much.

Miss Durham skimmed through the page hastily ; it was much shorter than the last and was evidently written almost in despair. It was dated "Villa Beau Rivage, Algiers," and it was signed briefly, "Yours, Jack Ludlow." For the rest, it was little more than a string of miserable questions.

Why had she not written? Had she never received his other two letters? Was she so cruel as to have forgotten him? Did she love him no longer, or was she ill? "Sometimes I fear your aunts must have intercepted my letters," went on the wailing and unhappy sentences, "and yet, how can that be the reason of your silence, when I know that you *must* have received my first letter of all! and yet you never came to the Junction to meet me and wish me good-bye as I asked you to do! What has happened to you? Are you not my own, bound to me by your own vows for ever? Soon, now, I shall be in England again, and then I shall come to Fairmead and claim you. Your people will not be able to keep me from you or to part us. Only write to me—write to me."

And there was more of it still—all in the same strain of reproach and misery.

Miss Durham read it all, just as she had read the two former letters which she had put upon the fire. She pursed up her lips as she read, and settled her glasses upon her nose. It was all horrible to her, and yet she gloated upon the delightful thought that she had circumvented this deprecating creature, who had done his best to ravish the lamb out of her fold and to seize her for his own. There had been love-making, evidently, between them, and poor silly Madge had had her head turned. Yes, that was the way with these terrible men; it was all sugar and honey at first, and then when they had married a girl, it all turned to gall and bitterness, and they ill-used her and neglected her and broke her heart!

Well, this man, who was no doubt a penniless adventurer eager for her money, should not have a chance of breaking Madge's heart—not if she could help it—Miss Durham was very certain of that! Madge should be saved at any cost. A few tears, and a few sleepless nights now, what were they in comparison of years of married misery hereafter? Madge would soon get over it, a month or two, at most, and she would be better—even if a little change of air were necessary to effect her cure—and then she would be herself again, merry and bright, with health's roses blooming in her fresh young cheeks; she would live to bless the day when her old aunt had saved her from the bondage of marriage, and secured to her the safety and peace of her maiden home.

And the prophecy, too, concerning the maids of Fairmead, would be duly carried out, as Providence no doubt intended it to be.

Then Aunt Durham, secure in the approbation of her own conscience, wheeled herself round to her writing-table hard by, dipped her pen with a firm hand into the inkstand, and remorselessly wrote as follows:

"SIR,—It is my painful duty to acquaint you that my great niece, Miss Margaret Durham, died last week. She caught a violent chill some days ago from exposure to the wet weather lately prevalent in England, and expired after a short illness from acute pneumonia. I enclose your letter to her and have the honour to remain

"Yours faithfully,

"M. S. DURHAM."

The wicked old lady chuckled a good deal as she fastened up this note and addressed it to J. Ludlow Esquire, at the Villa Beau Rivage. It seemed to afford her immense satisfaction, and the old head nodded and shook with internal glee as she struck the hand-bell on her writing-table sharply.

"Nothing but strong measures would stop it!" she muttered to herself, with a grin of hag-like malice. "I don't think my young gentleman will trouble us at Fairmead after *this!*"

When Wilson came back she gave him the letter and desired him to place it at once safely into the letter bag.

"If anyone ever asks for Miss Madge at the door, Wilson, kindly remember that she is *dead*."

"Good Lord, mum!" cried Wilson, considerably startled.

"Dead, my good fellow—*dead*," repeated the old woman emphatically. "She died last week, the second week in December, remember. Inflammation of the lungs—it was *very* sudden at the last."

And then Wilson retired, grinning from ear to ear.

"Lord! but she be a clever one, that old woman," he said to himself as he put the fraudulent letter into the post-bag, "and it 'ud take the devil 'imself to get the better of 'er."

That night Aunt Margaret could endure it no longer. Her heart burnt hotly within her, her head throbbed and ached, and all her woman's nature yearned over the child she loved.

When the household had all retired to rest—and they went to bed early in the winter at Fairmead—Aunt Margaret wrapped herself in her old red flannel dressing-gown, slipped her feet into her fur-lined slippers, and, candle in hand, crept like a thief out of her own door along the echoing corridor that led towards her niece's room. She was a quaint-looking figure enough, no doubt, had there been anyone there to look at her. The flickering candle flung odd shadows of her long-nosed profile against the walls, and of the queer-looking little knot into which she had screwed up her thin locks at the back of her head. There was nothing at all graceful or attractive about Aunt Margaret as she

crept along the passages on stealthy feet, but there was a whole world of untold devotion and unselfishness within that ungainly form, and it was the beauty of a true woman's tenderness and compassion that lighted up her faded eyes.

"Oh, my poor love, my lamb! my poor, sweet child!" she whispered to herself tearfully as she went. As yet, she had not troubled her head about the sin; all that she thought about was that she could help the sinner.

When she came near Aunt Durham's door, which she had to pass, she stood stock still for many minutes, shielding the flame of her candle with her hand and listening intently, for she well knew how keen and wide-awake those old ears still were; and had Aunt Durham been awake, it was more than possible that she might hear her go by; but there were no sounds within the room, and the loud beating of her heart and her own quick, nervous breathing were all that Aunt Margaret could distinguish.

So she passed along safely to Madge's door on the further side of the house. There was no answer to her timid knock, and after a moment she turned the handle of the door and went softly in. And there she was met by a sight which well-nigh broke her heart.

Madge, in her long white night-dress, with all her gold-brown hair streaming loosely about her shoulders, lay stretched face downwards upon the carpet, sobbing and moaning and beating the floor with her hands, and crying aloud in her anguish.

"Oh, what shall I do! What shall I do!" said the broken despairing voice over and over again.

In one moment Aunt Margaret had set the candle down on the table and was on the floor by her side, gathering the cold, shivering, trembling figure into her warm sheltering arms.

"Oh, my darling child, I have come to you, I will help you!" she cried, with a passionate earnestness mingling her tears with hers, and rocking her like a child upon her breast.

Worn out with her great grief, Madge clung to her, saying nothing at first, only nestling her shaking frame with a sort of animal instinct against the human warmth and heavenly pity that had come to her. What though the heart against which she leant was old, and foolish, and ignorant of the world? What though the mind of the poor little "old maid" was narrow and inexperienced? Were not the eternal instincts of motherly love and compassion there all the same? and did not the womanhood within her spring up at nature's touch into divinest sympathy and compassion?

Who is it that has ignorantly said that old maids are silly selfish creatures, incapable of warmth of heart, and fit subjects only for scorn and contumely?

How much of the real work of this hard world is not done, and well done, too, by these same despised "old maids," and who can tell what a wealth of true and tender feeling is not often hidden beneath the dull, unlovely exterior we others pass so contemptuously by?

And so this poor little faded old maid, whose narrow life and limited experience had taught her nothing of womanhood's supremest sufferings, yet at this hour of keenest trial was able to enter into it all, and to comfort and soothe the stricken woman who lay weeping upon her breast.

There were no cruel questionings, no angry reproaches, no inquisitorial probings of that sorely-wounded soul. Only sweet, purring caresses, and soft, stroking hands upon the low, bowed head and streaming hair, and a tender, broken voice, that murmured loving words into the wretched one's ear.

"I know! I know! Do not tell me. I have guessed it, darling."

"You said once you would stand by me always, Aunt Margaret," sobbed Madge; "always, whatever happened."

"And so I will, dearest. Do not be afraid. I will help you. We will think over what best to do together."

"I believed myself his wife. We were married—but it seems it was all a mistake and he was not free—and so he left me, and I do not know where he is."

Aunt Margaret scarcely listened. To her, the calamity was equally terrible whatever had led to it. That the author of the mischief should have disappeared was the only redeeming feature in the case. It was of the immediate future and of Aunt Durham and her terrible wrath, that she was thinking.

"I will take you away and no one shall ever know," she said at last as she helped her into bed, and far into the night she sat watching by the girl's side, long after she had sunk into an uneasy slumber, scheming and planning about what she could do for her, and how she was to take her away from home.

CHAPTER XIX.

JOHNNY.

"This is truth the poet sings,
That a sorrow's crowning sorrow
Is remembering happier things."

—TENNYSON.

FOUR years ago! How long a time it seems to look forward to, how brief and swift a space to look back upon. To the young, life and time seem endless, and four years are an illimitable cycle.

But as we grow older, and wiser, and sadder, there is something almost appalling in the headlong flight of those same years, that we deemed were to be so long, and we begin to realise for ourselves that, as the Great and Wise Old Book has told us, our “days are as grass, that in the morning is green and groweth up, but in the evening is cut down, dried up and withered.”

It is four whole summers since the *Naïad* lay at her moorings below Fairley Lock—since Jack Ludlow loved not wisely but too well, and since, for his sake, Madge Durham shattered for ever the virginal peace of her soul.

Four winters, with their snows have come and gone, four springs, with nipping east winds and frost-pinched buds, and now the fourth summer has come round and the sun is shining warmly and the trees are decked in their June bravery and all the flowers are blooming brightly in the garden borders.

On the lawn at Fairmead Hall life is repeating itself, as in small things it is for ever doing. Wilson and Thomas, not the same Thomas, by-the-way, but a younger and meeker edition, are bringing out the tea things on to the lawn. They have spread the snowy cloth upon the miniature table and set out the Queen Anne teapot and cream-jug and sugar-basin and the dainty Japanese teacups, side by side. There are three of these last still, one for each of the ladies, but there is, in addition, a curious and singular innovation to be seen upon the tea-tray. By the side of the tiny cups, and in a row with them, Thomas has sat down a substantial white and gold mug, upon whose fat and bulging side is inscribed in golden characters the homely nursery distich, “For a good boy.”

Miss Durham sits, as of old, bolt upright in her garden chair, with gold-rimmed spectacles on her nose, whilst Miss Margaret rises softly from her place and takes her place behind the tea-table. Hard by, Madge is seated on a low wicker-work chair. Her gold-brown head, from which she has cast off her wide straw hat, is bent over some white needlework, of exquisite fineness, at which she is stitching industriously. It looks like a tiny shirt.

Who, in the old days ever saw Madge toiling at her needle? She used to be always racing about—riding, or rowing, or romping with the dogs—but now she often sits for hours over her work.

“Now, where has that boy got to?” asks old Miss Durham, sharply. “Why is he not here for his tea?”

Madge looks up quickly. Her face is no longer pale and haggard as when we saw it last, but radiant with health and life, and there is the quiet light of a deep happiness in her heaven-blue eyes.

"He was here a moment ago," said Aunt Margaret, peering with half-shut eyes across the lawn.

"He is there," said Madge, below her breath, as she rose from her chair, laid down her work upon the ground, and went quickly forward.

And now, from the far-away corner of the sunlit garden, came swiftly running towards the group, a small creature—the new element that has stolen, in these latter days, into the tranquil lives of the three women of Fairmead Hall.

A frail, slenderly-built boy-child, with sleek, brown head and amber eyes, which when, as now, the sunlight shines into them, are almost golden in their tawny colour.

He came quickly, bearing a great bunch of wild flowers—foxgloves and dog-roses and long trails of feathery clematis aloft in both his tiny hands.

Madge, when she reached him, stooped down suddenly and caught him, flowers and all, to her heart, and lifted him up, laughing merrily, on to her shoulder, where he settled himself, entirely to his satisfaction with both arms tightly wound about her neck. It was a pretty picture—the fair woman and the brown-eyed child. The two heads, one of gold and the other of darkest brown, close pressed together, with the wild flowers behind them both ; the tiny face, with its delicate infantile colouring, nestled against the cheek, no less soft and pink than the rosebud lips that were laid against it.

"Johnny is late for tea. Johnny went too far away," said the tender woman's voice, with all her heart in her eyes.

"But Johnny got boofa' f'owers, all for his Mads," retorted the little fellow, with exultation—"all for his dear Mads," he repeated, hugging the golden head yet closer and tighter.

"It is extraordinary," remarked Miss Durham to Aunt Margaret, as she watched the little scene through her eye-glasses, "quite extraordinary how devoted Madge is to that child."

"Madge is fond of children," observed Aunt Margaret, putting two lumps of sugar into the white and gold mug.

"It is not *fondness*, my dear, it is *infatuation*," replied the old lady, somewhat markedly. "And it is not a wholesale worship of all children, but a particular adoration for that one special child."

Aunt Margaret was silent, but a wave of pink colour flashed suddenly across her withered face.

Madge was still playing with the boy at a little distance.

It has always struck me as strange," continued Aunt Durham, after a moment's pause, "that we should never have heard any more concerning that child's parentage.

One would have thought that his parents, after leaving him upon the doorstep of our lodge-keeper's cottage, would have returned to see what had become of him."

"No doubt they were poor tramps, aunt. You know we thought so at the time—half-starved beggars who had enough to do to feed themselves, and who, out of sheer misery, deserted the poor infant—leaving it at our gates on purpose, in the hope that you would take compassion on it and support it."

Old Miss Durham said nothing for a moment, then suddenly she turned round in her chair, and looked at her niece.

"Has it ever struck you Margaret, that Johnny cannot be the child of tramps?"

"Never, aunt! What else could he be, poor child, left like that by the roadside?" faltered Aunt Margaret, with the pink flush again mantling her face.

"Well—I for one, am certain that his parents were not beggars! The child, even at his tender age, has distinction and refinement in his looks. If he had been born in that debased condition of life, he would be clownish in his ways; blood must out—and that boy is, I could swear, of gentle blood! Look at him now!"

Madge had set the child down, and he was strutting towards the tea-table with his bunch of flowers across his shoulder, balancing his tiny feet one after the other before him, marching sturdily to Madge's voice, as she loudly sang the "British Grenadiers," and clapped her hands together, to mark the time, behind him. The boy's head was erect, his glance fearless and free; his lissome movements, his slender shape and well-made limbs, all told the same story.

Aunt Durham was right enough, this assuredly was no beggar-woman's deserted brat!

"But for your entreaties, yours and Madge's, Margaret, I should have sent that child to be brought up in the workhouse! What sort of figure would he have cut amongst the rough children there, do you suppose? Why you can tell him as you would tell a thorough-bred colt in a field of cart-horses!"

"That should comfort you, surely, aunt," Margaret plucked up courage to say, with a faint smile. "Since you have been so charitable towards this poor child and taken him out of your kindness to live in your house, it is fortunate, is it not, that he should turn out to be of a better stock than we imagined?"

"I don't know—I don't know. There is some mystery about him that I do not understand. Perhaps we are but nourishing a viper in our midst. Perhaps I should have been wiser not to give in to the foolish impulses of my nieces.

What place has a baby in a household of maiden ladies? we should have been better without him."

And then at that moment, little Johnny, with that serene disregard of persons which is one of the chiefest attractions of childhood, came tottering up to the old woman's side, and laid a tiny brown fist that grasped a tall purple foxglove, upon her black satin knee.

"Aunty Dullam have a flower, one of Johnny's boofa flowers!" lisped the baby voice, and the foxglove was waved disrespectfully up against the old lady's aquiline nose.

What a beautiful thing is a young child! Who can withstand its delicious ignorance? What principles, however strict and Spartan, be proof against the homeliness of its prattle? Is there not within all of us, however hardened, however worldly we may be—however wrapped about in a mantle of selfishness—just one soft spot always, to the last hour of our lives, wherein a little child's smile may enter in, piercing through and sunning and warming the toughest and most obdurate of hearts?

When little Johnny, the poor outcast waif, who had been found one May morning, rather more than three years ago, a small, living, wailing bundle of humanity, deserted upon the doorstep of the lodge-keeper's cottage—when this little child, who had been fed and clothed upon charity in the big house ever since, thrust the tall foxglove flower into the stern face of his benefactress, and turned his sunny amber-coloured eyes confidently up to those withered features above him, that were wont to inspire awe rather than confidence in the minds of older and wiser persons, then a very strange thing happened.

Instead of a scowl, there dawned a queer unaccustomed smile upon the harsh features. A smile that spread slowly across them, and made even the keen hawk eyes appear for a moment to be kind and womanly.

"You funny little fellow!" said Aunt Durham, taking the proffered foxglove from the tiny hand, "there, go and have your tea, Johnny, like a good boy." And the child, satisfied that his gift was accepted, sat down at the table obediently between Madge and Aunt Margaret. Later on, after the old lady had gone in to the house, these two walked together along the beech-shaded path that led to the river, whilst the boy danced along in front of them.

"She suspects, Madge—I am certain that she suspects," said Aunt Margaret fearfully, "she said there was a mystery, and that the boy was no beggar-woman's brat."

"Anyone could tell that, I should think!" answered Madge with a half laugh of pride.

"And then she noticed your devotion to him, Madge, she said it was 'extraordinary'; Oh! my dear, don't you think

you *might*, just before her, you know, manage to take a little less notice of him?"

"How am I to do that aunt, when he is all I have in the world, and my very life is bound up in him? You know that he is everything to me."

Her voice broke a little as she said it, and there were tears in her eyes.

"I know, my darling—I know," and Aunt Margaret patted the hand that was twined within her arm. "I know it would be very difficult, but still, for the boy's sake, you know! It would be wiser I think—you see if she were to find out the truth—oh! she is so hard and stern, I do believe she would turn him out of the house, poor little angel, I do really believe she would!"

"I daresay she would turn us both out for the matter of that," answered Madge bitterly, "and anyhow if my boy went I should very certainly go with him, even if the whole truth had to be told."

"And what then, would become of you both, Madge? For Heaven's sake be careful—for God knows how you and the child would live, if she turned you out of doors. Remember that we have nothing, positively nothing, but what she gives us."

"I could work for my living, perhaps," murmured Madge in a doubtful voice, after a few moments of silence.

"And how, pray? What could you do? What have you been ever taught to do, my poor child? Gentlewomen in this country are not educated to earn their own living—it is not expected of them. At best they can only be badly-trained governesses or companions to invalid ladies, and who do you think would take a governess or a companion hampered by a child?"

Madge sighed a little wearily. She had often thought it over before.

"We must try and keep our secret a little more strictly, dear Aunt Margaret, then—since if we fail to do so, it must mean ruin to my boy and to me."

"There is one other thing you might do," said her aunt after a brief pause, in a constrained voice.

Madge walked on more quickly, with a sudden flush upon her averted face.

Aunt Margaret glanced at her timidly out of the corners of her eyes. "My dear," she said at length, seeing that Madge did not speak, "I cannot help it if you are angry with me for saying it, I feel that I *must* speak of it to you."

"Did we not settle never to speak of this subject again, aunt?" answered Madge coldly, "the thing is over, past, forgotten! There is nothing more to be said or done. I do not want to speak of it again, ever—ever!" she added, with

a sudden passion. "Oh ! don't you see that unless I could forget it, I should go mad ?"

"My darling, I don't want to distress you—but is it right Madge, what you are doing? Would it not be better to think less of your own suffering, and more of your boy's future?"

"He has no future—none—none!" she cried a little wildly, and then she sank down upon a garden bench and burst into a passion of tears.

Aunt Margaret sat down patiently beside her, caressing her dumbly until the brief storm had passed away—her heart ached for her—for the undying pain she could not assuage, and for which there seemed to be no human consolation.

"I am so happy with him," said Madge presently, as she wiped away her tears, "so content with the present—with the treasure that has almost made me forget all my terrible past! Why do you want me to rake it all up, Aunt Margaret?"

"Because, my dearest child, your child may live to reproach you for resting content beneath a slur upon your name and upon his own."

Madge buried her face in her hands.

"I feel certain," continued Aunt Margaret, with a gentle persistence, "that it is your duty to the boy to find out his father, and to claim some sort of support from him—remember, Madge, that you were married in a church, by a clergyman of the Church of England, and in the presence of a witness; and, although that Mr. Storey who married you, got another living and went away, no one knows where, so soon after your wedding, yet I cannot but believe that he performed the ceremony in all good faith. Why do you still persist in doubting that you are his lawful wife?"

"Because of his own written words, aunt, that told me he was not free to love me—that he was tied to another woman before he knew me! What does that mean save that his marriage with me was a sham and a delusion? He deceived Mr. Storey as much as he deceived me. I see plainly now the meaning of many things that I could not understand at the time. The secrecy to which he bound me—the haste of it all—his persistent refusal to tell his mother—his evasive answers to all my questions about his people. It all points to one thing—he was a married man! and I, in my ignorance and folly, was an easy dupe to the fancy of an hour!"

"Madge, it is too horrible, I cannot believe it of him; the man would have been a veritable monster to have done such a thing!"

"And have we not been always taught that they *are*

monsters ! It was to my own undoing that I forgot it ! ” She spoke wildly and bitterly, twisting her hands with quick, nervous movements together. Aunt Margaret looked at her compassionately. It was not often that Madge referred to that dark chapter of her life ; the bitterness of this outburst betrayed how terrible her secret suffering must often be.

After a moment she turned round and took her aunt’s hand.

“ Dear Aunt Margaret, have I frightened you ? Do not look so distressed, dear. It will pass away—I shall forget it again, I often do for hours together—and God has given me so sweet a comfort in the child, that I ought to be thankful ! And then I have you to pour out my grumbles to, and I know how much I owe to you and how good you have been to me. How clever too ! When I look back to those terrible months at Boulogne, and remember how nearly I died and how devotedly you nursed me through it all—and then how wonderfully you managed about Johnny’s coming here ! I never understand to this day how you got over Aunt Durham, to say nothing of that horrid old Wilson ! It was all your doing—but for you the boy would not be here ; and now I often think she has really grown fond of him ! Who could help it ? ” added the mother, as her eyes rested fondly on the little figure that sat, making a daisy-chain, on the grass, a little way off ; “ he is such a darling, and so good ! Oh, I do feel it hard that he may not call me ‘ mother,’ though I know that is but a small matter, and a foolish thing to fret over when I have so much to be grateful for ! ”

Presently Aunt Margaret spoke again, in a low, timid voice :

“ Madge, if you believe all these terrible things are true about Mr. Ludlow, you must indeed hate him very much.”

“ No, that is the worst of it ! ” she answered, in a low, broken voice, whilst her lip trembled and sudden tears gathered blindingly in her eyes. “ If I could hate him it would be much better—God knows he deserves to be hated ! but, try as I will, I cannot ! I despise and loathe myself for my weakness—I try incessantly to think of all his perfidy and cruelty to me—and yet, do what I will, I cannot hate him ! The utmost I can do is sometimes, for a few hours, to forget him—at other times, when I think of him, I do not hate him at all ; I only think of how well he seemed to love me, and how happy we were during the hours that we spent together ! It is partly because I love him still—to my sorrow and my shame—that I cannot and will not move a finger to seek him out. I will not convict him of his sin, or bring home to him a crime that is punishable by law.”

“ But for your boy’s sake, Madge——”

" My boy must suffer too. Are we not told that the sins of the fathers are visited on the children?—that is the unalterable justice of life ! "

She rose as though to put an end to the discussion, and called to little Johnny to come to her; and then Aunt Margaret said very gravely, as she passed her arm within hers :

" All the same, Madge, I am not sure that some day you will find that you do not know the truth about it all. It seems to me as if there must be some terrible mistake somewhere, and you will find out that a chain of unhappy circumstances has divided you, and not the terrible and heartless crime of which you believe him guilty. I pray Heaven, my dearest child, that you may some day find it to be so."

" It is kind of you, dear Aunt, to say it," answered Madge, shaking her head sadly; " but, alas, I have no hope of it! nothing can do away with his own written words, and the horrible letter in which he renounced me for ever! There can be no mistake there! "

She lifted the child up in her arms, and a little sunshine came back to her sorrowful face as his tiny hands wound the daisy-chain about her neck.

" Why for you cry, Mads? Naughty Mads to cry!" said the little fellow, nestling his sunburnt cheek against hers.

" I won't cry any more, darling," she answered, and as she spoke and pressed him to her heart, all the love and light came back again once more to the mother's happy eyes.

CHAPTER XX.

THE BAD NEWS.

" And, when the stream
Which overflowed the soul was passed away,
A consciousness remained that it had left,
Deposited upon the silent shore
Of Memory, images and precious thoughts
That shall not die, and cannot be destroyed.'

—WORDSWORTH.

PERHAPS the darkest hour of Jack Ludlow's whole life was that on which old Miss Durham's letter had reached him, telling him that Madge was dead.

The blow had at first well-nigh stunned him. He had sat there motionless by his open bedroom window for upwards of an hour with the letter clenched tightly in his hands—unable to move, to think, or even rightly to realise the terrible news that it contained.

Then he had lifted his head and with half-blinded eyes had looked out upon the cloudless sky and tideless sea that

swept the lovely bay into an azure semicircle—looked at the wooded slopes dotted with white houses—at the Eastern town, clustering down below, with its countless domes and pinnacles, and beyond again at the distant range of mountains flushed with the morning glory of the African sunshine. The world was all fair and lovely, and redolent with the warm glow of life and movement, whilst she—she whom he had loved so well—she whom he had held in his arms and made his very own—part of himself—life of his life—she lay, cold and dead, moulderling beneath the damp brown sods of a far distant churchyard !

Oh, could this awful thing be true ?

He asked himself the question aloud in his agony, but it did not, nevertheless, occur to him to doubt the truth of the information that Miss Durham had sent him. For, in his wildest flights of fancy, it would never have entered into his mind to conceive it possible that she could invent so wicked and so cruel a lie—nor could any motive for doing so have ever presented itself to him. Moreover, it seemed to him that he now understood her silence and the reason why his letters had remained unanswered. She had been too ill to write—this horrible disease had attacked her, no doubt, immediately after he had left her. She had been already too unwell to come at his summons to wish him farewell. This, of course, was the reason why he had waited in vain for her at the Junction, where he had told her to meet him ; either she had not been well enough to go out and had never received his letter at all from Antonio, or else she had made an unavailing effort to do as he bade her, and illness had forced her to relinquish the attempt in despair. It seemed all clear as daylight to him now—all the torturing doubts and uncertainties he had endured were at an end. If she had ever seen his letters she had been too ill to answer them—too ill even perhaps to read them. Remembering those letters of miserable reproach, in which he had upbraided her for her forgetfulness and cruelty, he earnestly hoped that she had never seen them.

A horrible remorse overwhelmed him. Why had he not made it his business to see her before he left England ? Why had he not braved his uncle's decree and insisted upon deferring their departure until he could have left his young wife with a clear conscience and a light heart ?

When he began to think over what must really have happened to her, of how she had been too probably in total ignorance of his movements and of the horrible construction which she must doubtless have put upon his disappearance ; when he pictured to himself the tortures of mistrust which she must have suffered, and remembered that all this had been endured in silence, a silence which he himself had

imposed upon her, it seemed to him little wonder that her mental distress had so increased her bodily disorder that it had proved fatal to her.

The thought of her agony on his account half maddened him ! Why had he not gone to her boldly and claimed her for his own ? Why had he been afraid and ashamed to confess his marriage, and abide by the consequences of what he had done ?

Why ? Why ? Oh, vain and unavailing questions ! Oh, hopeless anguish of self-reproach ! For to-day the awful words "Too late" had been written by the mighty finger of an unalterable fate across the wretched history of his past !

All he could do now as he looked up at the calm, blue sky above was to wonder—as all those whose dear ones have been taken from them have ever wondered—whether from that great Unknown into which his Madge had passed, it was permitted to her to look down upon him now, to see all his agony of regret, and to understand at last the meaning of the things which had parted them so cruelly.

"If she sees me now, she will surely know all about it !" groaned poor Jack aloud in his misery. And then tears came to his relief and he knelt down and bowed his head upon his bed and sobbed as if his heart was broken, as indeed it well-nigh was.

After a long, long time, someone came and knocked at his door, and the voice of his mother's maid from without told him that Lady Mary was not at all well to-day and was asking for him.

Red-eyed and haggard he arose from his knees and replied that he would come to her at once.

In the first flush of his repentance and his wretchedness, he told himself that he would make a clean breast of the whole story of his marriage at once to his mother. It seemed to him the least that he could do to prove his respect and affection to the memory of his darling.

But when he came into Lady Mary's room he found that she was far too unwell to render it safe for him to run the risk of so exciting an avowal. Lady Mary had had another fainting attack, and the maid had already sent for the doctor. She was lying in her bed, very weak and feeble and almost unable to speak. She only held out her thin white hand to him and smiled when he stooped down to kiss her forehead. The room was darkened, and she could not perceive his altered looks, and it was perhaps fortunate for him that she was not strong enough for conversation, for he could have hardly found voice enough to have talked to her.

It was the worst relapse she had had, and it was many days before she was well enough to resume her gentle, invalid life.

By the time she was downstairs and able to go out again, Jack had come to look at things in a slightly altered aspect. To begin with he had got over the first keen anguish of his grief.

The sorrow that has never presented itself actually to our bodily senses, is apt to fade more quickly from our minds than that which we have seen with our eyes. The dead that die far away in a distant land, never seem to us to be so really gone from us as if we had stood by their dying bed, listened to their latest breath, and looked down in our loneliness upon their cold, sweet faces when all was over.

Jack did not actually forget Madge, nor did his sorrow cease to make his heart ache, but imperceptibly a dull resignation to the inevitable took the place of the first poignancy of grief, and at the same time the keen edge of his remorse for his own conduct wore away.

After a time it seemed to him that it would be only useless and foolish, besides very painful to himself, to tell to his mother the story of his brief and perhaps ill-considered marriage.

Why should he distress her with it, why upset her trust and confidence in himself? There was nothing now to gain for poor Madge—she was past all wordly advantages—and unworthy as he was, there was no one but himself to be considered.

He had in the first shock of his loss, written to old Miss Durham praying her for further particulars and dates of Madge's illness and death, and begging that some remembrance of her might be sent to him—and he had told her openly, now that it could hurt no one to know it, that he was her niece's husband. But this letter, by a curious fatality, never reached its destination. He had been unable to leave his mother's side that day, and he had not liked to entrust it to a servant, and so he had asked the doctor, a fussy little Frenchman, who had been called in to attend her, to put it into the post for him.

The doctor put it into his pocket, promising faithfully to do so, and straightway forgot it entirely. A fortnight later he found it by chance still in his great-coat pocket. He felt very sorry and very guilty, but by that time his patients at the Villa Beau Rivage had left, so there was no one to whom he could confess his carelessness, and after a brief moment of doubt and hesitation it seemed to the worthy man that, on the principle of "least said soonest mended," it would be the most simple plan to put the letter into the fire—which he accordingly did.

It was no wonder therefore that Jack never received any answer to it—a fact which after a time he ceased to trouble himself about.

What he did do, in consequence of the news which had reached him was, when his mother was getting strong again, to disabuse her mind concerning his supposed relations towards Agnes Verinder.

He told her briefly that his engagement to her was at an end and begged her to say nothing to him about it. She was of course full of dismay, and eager to question him, but Jack said he could not talk about it, and went out of the room rather suddenly, leaving her unconsciously under the impression that the subject was a painful one to him to discuss, so that she not unnaturally came to the conclusion that it was Agnes who had thrown him over.

Agnes's letters to her had been discretion itself. They had been full of affectionate anxiety and daughterly interest, but she never wrote about Jack in any way, so that Lady Mary seemed to see that Miss Verinder had had an object in this omission, and began to believe that she had treated Jack very badly.

Naturally the mother was angry with the girl who had so behaved to her son. She wrote her own version of the business to Lord Castlemere, full of indignation against the "heartless coquette" who had trifled with her boy's feelings, and she also indited a somewhat curt note to Miss Verinder herself.

"My poor boy has only just told me," she wrote, "that his engagement to you has been at an end for some time, this accounts of course for the unhappy and altered looks which I have noticed of late in him. I leave it to your own conscience, Agnes, to judge whether or no you have treated him well, and whether you have not done foolishly in disappointing the family hopes which were centred upon you ; to say nothing of breaking the heart of an excellent young man, for some whim of your own, which I hope you may never live to repent of."

"Which means that she hopes I *may* live to repent of it !" said Miss Verinder to herself when she read that letter, and then she laughed aloud. "My dear Jack is even a greater fool than I thought him to be ! he has done quite the honourable thing and has represented *me* to be the *jiltor* and not the *jiltée*, it's the more agreeable position of the two I own ! So now the secret is out, Master Jack ! and it was to back out of your engagement to me that you wrote the other letter which must have gone to the 'Creature !' Said 'Creature' evidently got you into her clutches again ! Well — the play is not played out yet, and if 'Creature' thinks she is going to marry you when you come back, she will find herself very much mistaken. I can afford to wait perfectly, and meanwhile, waiting happens to suit me !"

And then Miss Verinder's horse was brought round to the

door, and Major Lawley being announced at the same time, she went out quite light-heartedly for her morning ride under the escort of her ever-faithful cavalier.

After that confession to his mother Jack had been in some ways happier—having never loved Agnes Verinder, he shrank for the time with absolute repulsion from the very thought of her ; and the remembrance that for a moment he could ever have put her into the place that had been filled by his lost darling, was horrible to him. He told himself in those days that he would never marry, but would devote himself solely and entirely to his mother for the rest of her life.

He readily fell in with her wish to remain abroad for a much longer time than had been originally intended ; her health gradually but steadily improved, and she began to imagine that it was owing to her foreign travels that she was regaining her strength of body and her peace of mind, whereas it was due no doubt to Time, the great healer of all our sorrows, that the poor lady was slowly recovering from the shock and the sorrow of her husband's sudden death, which had been the primary cause of all the bodily sufferings she had undergone.

Time, too, began to work its accustomed effects upon Jack Ludlow also. Time, and change of scene, that other soothing influence of suffering humanity. Lady Mary's nature was not altered, it had only been in abeyance. With reviving health and spirits, there came a corresponding return to her habitual tastes and pleasures. The mother and son passed long months in Rome, in Naples, and subsequently in Vienna, and, needless to say, that in each of these cities Lady Mary Ludlow was furnished with the very best introductions. Society opened its arms to her gladly, and in foreign and ambassadorial circles she found a new zest and many hitherto untasted pleasures. In the summer months they retired to mountain scenery, or else to the princely castles of their Italian or Austrian acquaintances.

Jack, though he was somewhat graver and older than of old, entered into it all with the natural enthusiasm of his age. He gave up the joys of the hunting field, and the grouse, and the pheasants of his native land, with scarcely a pang, since he soon found that it was possible to enjoy both hunting and shooting of a hardly less exciting kind upon the forests and plains of central Europe, and he unfeignedly delighted in the society of the new friends they made abroad. He found out also that he could ride and shoot and dance ; aye, that he could even flirt, and enter very thoroughly still into each and all of these pastimes, although all the time the winter snows and summer dews were falling silently

day by day, as he believed, upon that far-away grave in an English churchyard. And let it not be thought that he was heartless in this, only a little bit selfish perhaps, and very human in his faults and shortcomings.

Lord Castlemere frequently joined them abroad. At first he was full of consideration and kindness concerning Jack's ruptured engagement ; he pitied him extremely, forbore to speak to him on the painful subject, and treated him with quite a paternal affection and tenderness.

But as the time went on, his old ambitions awoke again, and his old impatience rose up anew.

"Has he met no one abroad to whom he could take a fancy?" he enquired one day of his sister-in-law ; "he must have got over that old affair by now. Has he seen no one else?"

Lady Mary was forced to confess that he had not.

"It begins to trouble me very much, Mary, that the boy doesn't find a wife," Lord Castlemere said presently : "the title, as you know, becomes extinct if he does not marry and have a son."

They were walking in a terraced garden above the Lake of Geneva, in front of a charming country residence which Lady Mary had rented for a couple of months, it was now the end of June and her tenancy had nearly come to an end.

"Have you ever found out what really happened about Agnes Verinder?" asked Lord Castlemere presently.

"Never. Jack has never told me a single word about it ; if I have broached the subject he has shut me up at once and changed the conversation. I think it very strange——"

"So do I, especially as the girl is not married yet, and, as far as I can learn, has no prospect of being so. I believe he might have her now if he tried."

Lady Mary looked up quickly.

"I could not wish it, if she has behaved badly to him."

"Well, we have no proof that she did. It may have been in a great measure his own fault."

Lady Mary walked on silently for some moments.

"It is very strange," she said once more, "that I have never been able to make out what did happen."

"It's my belief the girl is hankering after him still," persisted her brother-in-law."

"What makes you say so?"

"Because I met her in the Oak Grove Lane the other day ; she was riding and I was driving the dog-cart. I should have passed her, of course, with a bow, but she reined in her horse, and I was obliged to stop—the lane is narrow, you know. And then she asked after you."

"Yes?"

"She looked quite sad and melancholy, and devilish hand-

some too, the jade ! and after I had told her how you were, and where you were, she lowered her eyes and began playing with her horse's mane, and then, just as I was thinking of going on, she jerked out quite nervously :

“ And—Jack ? how is Jack, Lord Castlemere ? ”

“ And you should have seen her eager face when I told her all I could about him, and at last she asked if he was going to be married—she did, upon my soul ! And when I said, not that I knew of, but that I heartily wished he would do so soon, she turned her face away and drew a deep sigh, and I could see her lips tremble, and if I could only have caught a sight of her eyes, I am certain there were tears in them. It's my belief that girl bitterly repents what she has done, and would give her soul to win our Jack back. And where could we find a more suitable wife for him—where, Mary ? ”

Lady Mary pondered deeply. The old ambitions, fired by Lord Castlemere's words, the old desire to see her grandson ere she died, and to know that the old race would be carried on by her son's child, awoke in her once more, and at the same time, there was rekindled within her, the old partiality for the beautiful girl whom, ever since her boy was at Eton, she had chosen out of the whole world in her own mind to be his wife. Lord Castlemere was right. Beauty, wealth, and birth, all seemed to her to be united in Agnes Verinder. Where could she find for her boy a wife more worthy of him ? Was it, indeed, possible that, with care and judicious management, she might still be won by him ?

The very thought of it fired her blood anew.

“ Do you, indeed, think it would be possible ? ” she said below her breath.

“ What are you going to do when you leave this place ? ” asked Lord Castlemere.

“ We have not made any plans, we have some invitations to stay with friends in the Tyrol. I do not know yet whether Jack will care to accept them.”

“ Why not come home ? You are quite well and strong now, and you cannot go on wandering about Europe for ever. Come home and stay at Castle Regis, and let us see what we can do together towards patching up this broken match again.”

“ But surely Agnes will be in London at this time of the year ? ”

“ No, by good luck she is at home. I hear that Mrs. George Verinder has lost her father, so she has not taken a house in Town for the season this year. Agnes is at Deep Deane.”

Talking over a project is pretty certain to strengthen and

determine one's resolution to carry it out. Lord Castlemere, who at first had only thrown out a tentative feeler on the subject of Miss Verinder, not knowing quite how Lady Mary might take the suggestion, now grew quite excited about it. The idea seemed to him to become every moment more feasible and more easy to be carried out.

Lady Mary offered no objection to coming home. On the contrary, she said herself that she had begun to get tired of moving about, and of foreign hotels and foreign life. Once or twice of late she had begun to think she would like to settle down again in her own country, and as Northerley Park was let, there would not be the painful associations of her married home to be faced.

If Jack did not mind she would come back to Castle Regis at the end of the month.

"There would be something to come home for, too," she added with animation, the old instincts of managing and moulding her son after her own fancies and desires, awaking in her again. "If only we can induce these tiresome young people to make up their differences, you and I, dear brother, will be able to finish our lives in peace."

Jack, when consulted, said he was quite willing to go home, and so the matter was settled.

CHAPTER XXI.

LANCE RECEIVES A SHOCK.

"Love sought is good, but given unsought is better."

—SHAKESPEARE.

ALL this time Lance Parker, too, had been out of England.

It will be remembered that it was Lance, who, by his inopportune appearance behind his friend in the writing-room of the Carlton Club, had most unwittingly been the indirect cause of that terrible blunder in Jack's correspondence, which had resulted in such disastrous consequences to poor Madge.

The friends had dined together that night, and then they had parted, little thinking how long it would be before they were destined to meet again.

During that dinner, it is needless to say that Madge Durham's name was not so much as mentioned between them, although, no doubt, she was to each the uppermost thought of his heart.

The average Englishman is not prone to make confidences even to his dearest friend, and, between these two, there had been already so many strained moments and estranged feelings upon this delicate subject, that it was scarcely to be

wondered at that they both exerted themselves to the uttermost to avoid any stumbling again in so dangerous a direction.

It was not likely, moreover, that Jack would reveal his secret, which he was only too anxious to guard, to the man whom he well knew to have loved his wife in vain, and Lance was too sore at heart to care to question him, however remotely about her.

He did, however, gather from Jack's conversation that he had left Fairley for ever—for Jack mentioned casually that the house-boat was laid up for the winter, and that Antonio had left his service, and from this he inferred that Madge was forgotten and forsaken as well.

After Jack had wished him good-night, which he did at an early hour, Lance sat up for a very long time, by himself, smoking and thinking in a very gloomy frame of mind.

Jack evidently had cared nothing about Madge Durham ; he would not do his friend the injustice to believe that he had willingly trifled with her feelings, but, anyhow, he had been blind to that which he himself had perceived, blind to the wonderful fact that he might have won her love, even if he had not already done so.

"He could not see what that girl was," thought poor Lance to himself. "Jack is too accustomed to his fashionable London women to understand and appreciate the beauty of an unspoilt nature like hers. And I would have given my life for what he has passed by without so much as a regret!" It was a bitter thought, and one for which there was no redress. It did not occur to Lance, as it might have done to some men, that, as his friend was going abroad, he might as well go down to Fairley, and try to win for himself that which he had flung away. Lance had too much respect for Madge to take such a course ; he knew very little about love, but he felt instinctively that if Madge had indeed cared for Jack, it would be an insult to her to endeavour to win her love himself. Her heart once given away, she was not at all likely to transfer it to anyone else ; to love once with her would be to love always.

Lance was the most simple-minded creature in existence, and he had positively no experience with regard to women ; but still he had an unerring conviction of what this one woman would be likely to think and feel on such a matter, and he sighed very deeply and sadly when he reflected that Jack's departure might very probably bring to her a great deal of sorrow and unhappiness, which he himself was powerless to mitigate.

"Time will help her," he said to himself. "Nothing else but time and her own goodness—God bless her! Well, as for me, I shall never love again—she was the first, and she

will be the last!" And then he got up and went to bed in the small hours, and, oddly enough, he slept soundly, and comfortably, and most prosaically until the sun was high in the heavens the following day.

After that Jack was gone, and a day or two of loafing about London doing nothing had passed away, Lance began to feel that he was very much left in the lurch. He had lost not only that phantasmagorial dream of a love that could never be, but also—and perhaps this last was the more practically inconvenient of the two—the friend and companion of his daily life.

No shooting with Jack this autumn, no hunting in the approaching winter! What on earth was Lance to do with himself? He had other invitations, but somehow he did not care for any of them; one was from a bad-tempered chap with whom he always managed to fall out, another had a fine lady wife who could not stand smoke, a third was elderly, with a bevy of madcap daughters who were for ever getting up after-dinner dances at which the tired-out sportsmen were expected to caper. None of these friends suited him; he wanted Jack, or some excitement calculated to make him forget Jack. Jack and he got on; they suited each other, they never exerted themselves to entertain one another, and yet they always managed to do so naturally, and without any effort at all. And this is, perhaps, the truest definition of a perfectly harmonious and congenial friendship that can be given.

Well, just as Lance was at his wits' ends, and in the very lowest depths of spirits concerning his prospects, he most providentially came across a young man who was rushing down St. James's Street, in a pot hat and a large-patterned check suit, at the average speed of twenty miles an hour.

He was a Scotchman, James MacGregor by name, but, unlike most of his countrymen, he was the noisiest, jolliest, most energetic man of Lance's acquaintance. He was always in a turmoil, always had something fresh on hand, some new scheme, some wonderful hobby to ride to death.

When he ran full tilt against Lance in front of Briggs's shop, it was evident that he was in hot pursuit of some new and absorbing excitement.

"Hullo, Jimmy! what's up now?" enquired Lance, laconically. Not having seen his friend for a year, this was, of course, greeting enough for a man of Lance's temperament.

"My dear chap, delighted to see you! Can't stop! can't stop! I'm in a devil of a hurry! Not a moment to lose—haven't had even time to change my clothes, you see, since I came up. I'm off now to keep an appointment with a man. Can't stop! Come along! Will tell you all about it."

He had linked his arm through Mr. Parker's, and was now dragging his captured friend at a terrific pace down the street.

"Off in three days' time. Grand shooting expedition right round the world. Big game our object. North America first, then work down south to Peru and Paraguay, after that China, India, Siberia—the Lord knows where! Six of us going. Got kits, and servants, and outfits; everything together all ready; and now at the last one of the fellows funks it! Says his health won't stand the roughing, and wants to chuck it up. Isn't it a beastly shame? But I'm going to meet him now, and give him a talking to."

By the time they had reached the club where the defaulter was to be reasoned with, Lance had somehow caught the fire of his friend's enthusiasm, and had offered himself in the place of the gentleman who "funked it."

It was just what he wanted—rough travel, big game, wild countries—a complete upheaval of his existence, and a long change out of England and its memories.

"Put off your departure a week," he said to MacGregor, "and if this man won't go with you, I will."

The man backed out of it, and Lance went. He wrote to Jack, of course. Wrote first, just before he left England, to tell him of his plans, a letter which Jack read with feelings of envy at his good luck, and again more than once from different points of his journeyings, in fact whenever MacGregor's party touched civilization in their wanderings, Lance scarcely ever failed to send a short bulletin to his friend. But somehow, in that wild life, the links which had once bound him so closely to Jack, waxed slacker and slighter. The hardships of country and climate, the rough struggle for the necessities of existence, the daily change of scene, and above all the wild excitement of chase after bear or bison, and those great horned creatures that roam over the boundless plains of the American continent—all this made up the whole sum of life to him, and filled his mind and thoughts from morning till night, and sometimes, too, from night till morning, so that there was no room left in it for anything else.

Sometimes sitting by the red camp fires in the wild forest, or wilder mountain glen, as he smoked his evening pipe before turning in to the tent which was to shelter his well-earned slumber, now and again Lance would think about Madge, and wonder what had become of her—whether she still lived with her old aunts at Fairley, and paddled her little canoe, or sculled poor timid Aunt Margaret in the skiff between the locks, or whether the old aunt was dead and gone, and had left her rich and independent, free to go forth and see the world and meet someone worthier and better

than either he or Jack had been? He used to think of her now without any pain or bitterness at all; it did not give him the slightest pang to reflect that he would perhaps never see her again, only a little tender softness would steal into his heart when he remembered her. It was the one green spot of romance in his life, and just for the sake of its own innate sweetness he cherished it still, embalmed in the depths of his secret heart, and enveloped in a gentle and not altogether unpleasing melancholy.

And so four years passed away with him, too, and it was only just after Jack Ludlow and his mother had returned to Castle Regis, that one day the party of six who had stuck together so long, came to the conclusion that they were tired of killing big game; tired of sleeping on the ground and cooking their own food, tired of tramping over mountains and camping in desolate places—that, in short, they had all had enough of it, and had better set their faces towards home again.

One of the party was knocked up, too; another had received a letter three months old announcing the death of his father and urging him to return; and MacGregor himself was rather keen to go home and purchase a property in the Highlands which he had always coveted, and which had unexpectedly come into the market. So they struck their tents for the last time, rode thirty miles to the nearest town, from whence they took coach across forty miles of mountain roads to the nearest railway, and thence by easy stages to the sea—and so, back to England.

And on the same day that Lance Parker set foot on English soil again, silently and all unknown to him, there was turned over another page of the volume of Madge's life. So small and so invisible are the links which weld together the destinies of the great crowd of human puppets that are helplessly tossed along the mighty rushing river of this world! Lance, in the natural order of things, came straight off from Liverpool to London. He looked a sorry ruffian, as indeed did the whole party, as they got out of the train at Euston Station. They wore rough, travel-stained clothes, coarse flannel shirts, heavy leather gaiters and clumping boots, and Lance, for one, had grown an enormous, bushy, red beard, which did not at all enhance his personal beauty. All this had to be altered before he could present himself again before the world of London society, in the month of July.

After two days of frantic exertions amongst tailors and hatters and hosiers, and a clean shave of the beard of his travels, Lance ventured at last to go timidly into his Club. Here, a pile of letters had been accumulating for the last four years, and had grown into a formidable heap, which he

carried away to a table to run through and for the most part commit at once to the rubbish-basket. Bills, circulars, begging letters—and again, more circulars! Four years of them! Did anybody ever understand the why or the wherefore of all those heaps of circulars that greet one invariably after an absence from home? Why do they send them? How do they expect to benefit by them? Who is it that ever makes the slightest use of them? It is an unfathomable mystery, that inundating stream of printed circulars which dogs our footsteps wheresoever we go!

Lance sat on patiently, tearing them up and casting them into the basket at his feet, for the space of half an-hour or so, without so much as looking at them.

Coals, artificial teeth, ready-made clothes, loans of money, patent medicines, grand pianos, sunshine soap, ventilated pot hats, cee-spring victorias, self-suspending braces and second-hand drawing-room furniture. Everything, in short, under the sun that the heart of man can imagine or desire, seemed to have been presented to his notice during the years of his absence. Here and there was a dinner invitation of a year or more old, that had long since answered itself by silence, or an old bill that had long ago been paid.

And then, just as he was nearly at the end of this dreary heap, and only two or three unopened envelopes remained still in his hands, his eyes fell upon a little note in an unknown handwriting—a handwriting that somehow sent a strange thrill of wonder and expectation dancing through his veins.

He turned it over—as we all do with a letter that puzzles us—before opening it. The paper was white and thick, the handwriting was a woman's, and the post-mark was "Fairley." He hesitated no longer, but tore it open.

It was dated a month back, and began without any beginning at all.

"Do you remember that once, long ago, you promised to be my friend and to help me if I were ever in any trouble? Now I write to remind you of that promise. My trouble is very great. I have no friend in the world but you to turn to—will you help me? I cannot write what it is, I will tell you when I see you. The day after to-morrow I am leaving Fairmead and coming to London. Will you be at Paddington Station at 5.20 to meet me? Unless you telegraph to me to the care of the postmistress in the village, I shall expect to see you on the platform.

"MADGE."

He read it over and over again, and with a sickening despair he realised that the date was a month ago, that she

must have come to London as she said, expecting to meet him, and that he had failed her !

What could her trouble have been ? Why had she come to London ? Why, in the house where she had been sheltered from childhood, did she say that she had no friend on earth but himself ?

It was all a fog, dense, impenetrable and hopeless, to poor Lance ! He sat staring at the note for long minutes, helplessly and miserably, sticking his eyeglass into his eye with the uncouth nervous gesture of old, as though it might help him to read the unfathomable riddle ; but he could make nothing of it.

Was she at Fairmead ? Was she in London ? He could not tell. "I am leaving Fairmead," that did not necessarily mean that she was not going back to it ; probably she had only come to London for a visit, or even, perhaps, for a day on purpose to consult him. By this time she must have long ago have gone home.

And what was he to do ? How was he to help her now ? Great Heavens, what a brute she must have thought him when she got to Paddington and found he was not there ! He who would give his right hand to help her ! The very thought of it was maddening. He sprang to his feet and clenched his fists in impotent despair.

"But for that cursed delay in New York," he cried aloud in his wretchedness, "but for that idiot MacGregor, who kept us all waiting about for him, for that other trouble about the baggage up country, I might have been here in time !"

But when he came to think it over calmly, he saw that he could not have been back.

Fate had taken him out of England, and fate had kept him away, until the one opportunity of serving the only woman he had ever loved was over and past !

The first practical result which arose out of the chaotic despair of his mind, was that he rang the bell and sent for a Bradshaw.

He looked out the trains, and found that he could get down to Fairley in the morning.

"It is clear that I must go there," he said to himself as he finished his railway researches, and then he proceeded to the dining-room to discuss a modest and solitary meal.

What he was to do when he got to Fairley he was not at all certain. Mr. Parker was a painfully shy man, and when he reflected that he had no acquaintance with the elder Miss Durham, having, in fact, only once seen her in Fairley Church, on which occasion she had glared at him furiously, and had straightway inspired him with a great and terrible sense of awe, and, moreover, that even his acquaintance

with the younger aunt was but a very slight one, it did certainly strike him as rather a bold proceeding that he should go deliberately down from London to Fairley to call, unasked and with no tangible excuse, upon the ladies. Having heard too, of Miss Durham's singular idiosyncrasies, he could not help feeling convinced that he would be but indifferently received, if even he were so fortunate as to be received at all ; whilst to ask for Madge herself, would be to court failure, since in all probability he would not be allowed to see her. His heart quailed within him, as he reflected upon the formidable nature of the task before him. Summoning up all his courage, however, he reflected that it could not lead him into great danger were he merely to ring the bell at the front door, to enquire for Madge, and to leave in the butler's hands a card for her, with a pencilled line to say that he had only just returned to England. This, if she ever received it, would, at any rate, exonerate him in her eyes, and, at the worst, he decided it was what he would do.

Then there was always the chance that, by wandering down by the river, near her old haunts, he might happen to meet her—if it were fine, she would, of course, be on the river ; he would walk along the tow-path first and look for her, and at the vision conjured up to his imagination of Madge, radiant and smiling, as he had seen her last, coming forward in her simple white gown and flower-strewn hat to meet him, or sculling herself rapidly to the bank in glad surprise at the sight of him—his spirits rose so greatly that he forgot his fears and his apprehensions, and addressing himself heartily to his cut from the joint and his pint of Burgundy, he finished them both with an excellent appetite.

The next day found him at Fairley. The weather was still and sultry ; a warm haze filled the air, and shrouded the hillsides with faint mists.

The village seemed somehow to be unusually still and quiet. No one seemed about—perhaps the people were haymaking. There were not even any children playing on the green.

Lance turned into the little post-office. He had been on friendly terms with the postmistress.

But it was the face of a stranger whom he encountered across the rude wooden counter.

He bought some stamps, and lingered a little over the purchase.

“A warm day, ma'am,” he remarked.

“Aye, indeed, sir. It have been a terribly trying summer.”

“Has it? I hear it has been fine.”

“Too fine, sir—too hot to be healthy. There have been fever shameful bad through the valley in these parts.”

"Fever?" — he looked up, startled. "What sort of fever?"

"Typhus, sir. The childer has been dying by the score in this parish. They've had to shut up the schools. Good-morning, Mr. Bowles; what can I do for you to-day?"

A fresh customer, a burly farmer, had entered the little shop. The woman might, perhaps, have told him more, but she turned towards the new-comer, and Lance, feeling a little bit disturbed and uneasy, yet with no definite thoughts of evil as yet, left the shop.

He went his way down to the river, but he saw nothing of Madge. From the lock right down to the farm, where they had first spoken to her, where the fire had been, and where Jack had rescued Emmy Gates out of the burning house—he walked the whole length of the river-side, but he did not see her.

There was no slight, white-robed figure coming forward to meet him along the straight, grass-bordered path, neither canoe, nor boat of any sort or description, shot across the water from beneath the overhanging branches of the great trees that bordered Fairmead Park.

He passed close to the boat-house, but the doors were closed, and no boats were tied up to the little landing-stage outside. Then he went back again, and gazed sadly enough at the spot where the beautiful *Naiad* had lain so long at her moorings.

The scene recalled to him so much both of Jack and of her, that it seemed but yesterday that they had been there; when friendship had been a living reality, and hopes of dawning love had blossomed thickly in his heart.

The wooded banks, the banks starred with yellow iris and spikes of purple loosestrife, the fairy islets dotted down the stream, the distant surf of the weir and its harmonious murmur—all were there, unchanged—unaltered. Only where the *Naiad* had lain, there was nothing—only a swan and her grey-plumaged brood stealing in single file along the shadowy stream, and a green-and-gold-breasted kingfisher sitting motionless on the half-submerged bough of an alder, that had fallen forwards into the water.

There was no Madge.

With a vague presentiment of evil, Lance turned again, and set his face towards the red-brick house beyond the great elm trees.

He walked boldly up the avenue, and rang the bell at the front door. He had time to notice whilst he waited, how still and deserted the whole place looked—how utterly devoid of the signs of human life.

Presently his summons was answered, and a footman came to the door.

"Is Miss Margaret Durham at home, and is she well?"

"Sir?"

The question seemed to appal the man to whom he addressed it. He stared at him with something of horror in his face.

"Can you not hear me?" said Lance, impatiently. "Is Miss Margaret Durham in?"

Wilson, the butler, was crossing the hall. At the sight of Lance Parker he started, and came hurriedly forward, sending his underling hastily to the right-about.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he asked politely of the visitor.

"Good heavens! it's simple enough. I am asking if Miss Margaret is at home, and that fool of a fellow can only stare at me with his mouth open."

Wilson looked down. For the first time it struck Lance that both men were dressed in sombre black.

"We have had a great visitation here, sir. Miss Margaret lies in the churchyard."

"*Dead?*" gasped Lance, turning white as ashes and falling back against the door-post. Wilson nodded gloomily.

"She died of typhus fever, sir, little more than a month ago. The family is in great affliction. Did you wish to speak to Miss Durham? I am almost afraid she will be unequal to seeing you. She doesn't receive strangers, now, but I might ask—"

But Lance did not want to see Miss Durham. He did not even want to see Aunt Margaret—he did not think of her. If Madge was dead, nothing else at Fairmead could keep him at its doors.

He scarcely knew how to control those great choking sobs which came suffocatingly up from his heart into his throat. He shook his head and walked almost wildly away.

And Wilson looked after him.

"I know him," said the old reprobate, with an evil grin, to himself. "I know him fast enough! He come after Miss Madge. I wasn't going to tell him nothing. He's brought trouble enough into this fam'ly, as it is. And he ax for Miss Margaret, and what I tell'd him's true enough and no lie. That's the chap—and a precious ugly chap, too. I never knowed, for certain, which on 'em it was—but it's him, sure enough."

Ten minutes later, Lance Parker was standing in Fairley Churchyard, before a grave over which the fresh-sown grass was just beginning to grow greenly.

And as he stood there, with folded arms, looking down sadly upon the narrow mound, some stonemasons, wheeling a truck, came up to the place where he stood.

Then Lance saw, with a shock of horror, that they were

bringing a cross of white stone in several divisions. They had come to set it up over the grave by which he stood.

He cast one hurried glance, ere he turned hastily away.

The morning sunshine fell upon the glittering whiteness of the stone, and upon a name in jet black characters engraved upon it.

The name was "Margaret Durham."

CHAPTER XXII.

"OFF WITH THE OLD LOVE."

" Woman's faith and woman's trust,
Write the characters in dust."

—WALTER SCOTT.

A HAMMOCK of gay-coloured silken cords was slung between two chesnut trees upon the lawn, and a woman, beautiful as Cleopatra of Egypt, lay coiled within its netted folds. Her dark head was pillow'd against a scarlet cushion, one arm, bare nearly to the elbow, was flung up half across it, and one slender foot hung over the side, the dainty pointed shoe touching the earth as the hammock swung gently to and fro. There was a mass of white muslin drapery crushed up together within the net, also an open book, face downwards, and an enormous white feather fan.

Agnes might have been asleep. Her eyes were shut, her long dark lashes swept her delicate-tinted cheeks, her red lips were parted, but for the regular movement of her foot as it touched the grass, no one would have imagined her to be awake.

Yet, despite the deep repose and peace of her slumbrous attitude, Miss Verinder was very wide awake indeed, and many anxious and worried thoughts were teeming in her brain.

Four years, whilst they had in no way dimmed her grand and perfect beauty, had not passed over her head without leaving some traces behind them.

Life and time do mostly one of two things to us. Either they soften our heart, or else they harden it. Either they leave us with wider sympathies and a broader spirit of tolerance and charity, or else they render us colder, narrower, more selfish, and more self-seeking. For there is no standing still in this world. It must be either one thing or the other.

The four years that have elapsed since we saw her last have not left Agnes Verinder untouched.

She had been selfish and pleasure-seeking before, as well as calculating and cold-hearted, and all this has become strengthened and intensified in her to-day. The small amount of goodness there was in her has diminished, whilst

the evil has grown rampant and flourished luxuriantly, till the weeds have choked up the flowers, so that they have well nigh perished altogether from the ungenial soil.

As she lies in dreamy silence in the gently swaying hammock, her features, that are just now in absolute repose, might, to an accurate observer, betray a faint indication of the change within her. There is a certain hardness at the corners of that perfect mouth, a faint sneer in the upward pressure of the full under-lip and there are lines of bitter discontent scored upon the marble of her brows. She is tired of the game of life, tired of pleasure's round, of the purposeless whirl of dress and society, and utterly dissatisfied with herself!

For, although she is beautiful and wealthy, Agnes Verinder has not made a success of her life.

In the full confidence and arrogance of her youth, she had believed that the future was in her own hands, that success in the form of a splendid marriage would come to her naturally with no effort of her own. Like some princess of fairy lore, she had imagined that she would have only to pick and choose amongst those who would fall prostrate at her feet.

As a matter-of-fact, the rich noblemen she wished for did not present themselves in crowds before her as aspiring husbands. A great many men were certainly strongly attracted by her beauty, and many of them made a considerable amount of love to her, but whether it was owing to her notorious and persistent flirtation with Major Lawley, or to something inherent in herself which repelled in the end, at the very moment when most she desired to please--the result from whatever cause was the same. One after the other, the men she had been most desirous to capture, drew back before they had committed themselves irrevocably, in most cases with a feeling of thankfulness that they had not gone far enough to make retreat impossible.

She was, no doubt, a goddess to worship, and moreover she was a woman whose beauty might be dangerous to a man's peace of mind, but she was scarcely a wife whom any one in his sober senses would desire to take home to his heart for the residue of his existence.

So Miss Verinder was Miss Verinder still, and often and often she bitterly regretted the evil chances which had caused poor malleable, gullible, soft-hearted Jack Ludlow to slip through her fingers!

There was one man, of course, whom, if she wished, she might have married at any moment. This was her devoted admirer, Major Hugh Lawley. For this man alone of all men upon earth, Agnes had at one time experienced such faint twinges of real emotion as her cold nature was capable

of. These, however, she had conscientiously and persistently smothered, for she had no intention of marrying Major Lawley. He was poor, he was hampered by debts, he had no future expectations, and he was, moreover, a man of no family, his father having been a respectable middle-class merchant connected with the Manchester cotton trade.

It amused her to keep him dangling after her, and his devotion ministered to her vanity. But now, even this entertaining pastime was beginning to pall upon her, and the faint affection which she had once felt for her slave had worn itself out. She was beginning to get very tired of him. She had, moreover, a shrewd suspicion that she had been foolish in permitting him to dance attendance so long, and so incessantly upon her.

One or two people to whose houses she had been accustomed to go, forgot last time she was in London to invite her to their parties.

Old Lady Prendergast, who was a great stickler for the proprieties, and was known to be extremely particular respecting the manners and morals of her acquaintances, most distinctly passed her by in the Park as if she did not see her, and when, on one occasion, she had encountered Mrs. Chesterton FitzNorman and her daughters in a friend's drawing-room, that lady had risen hurriedly to her feet at her entrance, and summoning off her plain, but well brought up girls with scarcely concealed haste under her wing, she had bundled them quickly out of the room without so much as seeming to perceive the entrance into it of a beautiful young woman who, only a year before, had been the acknowledged belle of her own ball.

These things were gall and wormwood to Agnes Verinder. Her pride suffered bitterly, and her wrath became kindled against the man for whose sake she was subjected to such insults.

"It is all Hugh's fault," she told herself angrily. "He has compromised me by his idiotic devotion! these hateful women with their propriety have been scandalized because they have seen him hanging about after me."

And then she longed, more intensely than ever, to make some undeniably first-rate match which should force all these people who had snubbed her to crowd about her once more; to flatter her and fawn upon her, and to feel very sorry that they were ever so foolish and so short sighted as to turn their backs upon her.

As yet, however, Agnes had apparently no prospect whatever of indulging in either triumph or revenge at the expense of her enemies.

This is, perhaps, what had soured and altered her, stamp-

ing those hard and bitter lines upon her beautiful face which went far to spoil its perfection of form and colour.

As she lay with closed eyes in the gently swaying hammock, evil thoughts were surging hotly at her heart. Anger and hatred, impotent rage against a fate that constantly baffled her, and a loathing of those who had by accident or by intent, combined to thwart her wishes. She was even angry with her aunt because she could not take a London house for her, and still more angry with her aunt's deceased father, for daring to die in May.

"Why didn't the old brute die last January when he was ill before!" she said to herself with childish fury; "it wouldn't have mattered then; she would have been out of her crape by now and going about again, but to go and do it in *May*, of all times of the year——!"

A sound of wheels came faintly across the gardens from the direction of the carriage road.

Half opening her languid eyes, Agnes, from beneath their dark-veiled lids, could see that it was Mrs. George Verinder driving herself home in the phaeton from an expedition to the neighbouring town.

Mrs. George sat bolt upright in her crape-trimmed garments; they looked somewhat dusty and shabby in the full glare of the afternoon sunshine, her face was flushed with heat, and her fringe was limp and untidy.

Agnes did not take the trouble to move. She closed her eyes again. What a mercy it would be, she thought, if she could only become independent of this elderly aunt, without whom the customs of her country would not allow her to go where she wanted.

Presently Mrs. George came across the lawn towards her, fanning herself with a newspaper.

"Phew!" she gasped, "how hot I am! You have no conception what it is, driving along those dusty roads without a bit of shade."

"Oh, yes I have!" was the lazy answer, "that was the reason I preferred to remain at home. I am quite alive to the aspect of the Northminster Road on a hot day."

"Well, I confess you have the best of it here. How cool and comfortable you look! I never knew anyone so clever in taking care of themselves as you are, Agnes."

"I don't know who one can expect to care for one in this world better than oneself," is the lazy answer.

"Here you are, looking so cool and fresh and peaceful, whilst I am perfectly grilled! and so exhausted and worn out, too, with dancing in and out of those stupid little shops that never seem to keep anything one wants, to say nothing of waiting twenty minutes in the sun at the railway station for that all."

She flung herself down in a garden chair, casting her heavy black hat down on the ground beside her.

Agnes softly closed her eyes. It was really not worth while keeping them open to look at such a hot, unpleasing spectacle as Mrs. George presented.

Besides, she had nothing to say. Her own thoughts, troublous as they were, were more interesting than her aunt's groans over the heat.

There was a little silence. Then Mrs. George observed quietly :

"All the same I have brought back a piece of news for you."

"What is it? have they postponed the flower-show? or has the doctor's wife got a new hat? or perhaps the church steeple has tumbled down, that would be really exciting!"

"Oh, of course, if you speak in that drawling tone of voice, and won't even take the trouble to open your eyes or look as if you took the slightest interest in what I am telling you——"

"My dear aunt! don't be offended; but, really, you know, what *can* be interesting or exciting news from Northminster! It's the deadest, dullest town in all England."

"Oh, well—I thought it *very* exciting."

"It is too hot to excite oneself. Pray don't keep me in suspense."

"Jack Ludlow has come home."

"What!" in one second with a violent upheaval of the hammock, Miss Verinder had twisted herself rapidly round and sat bolt upright facing her aunt. Her eyes were wide enough open now.

"It is impossible! I don't believe it," she said in a voice of suppressed excitement.

"Oh, very well, if you suppose I am telling you lies——"

"Don't be foolish, aunt—tell me what you have heard. Who told you?"

"I have heard nothing. Nobody told me. I saw him arrive."

"You *saw* him?"

"Yes, whilst I was waiting at the station for that blessed parcel of yours, up drove the Castle Regis omnibus, and up too, came the London train, and presently they appeared: luggage, maid, valet, and all! and then Lady Mary, a perfect wreck, my dear, hair turning grey, and as thin as a hurdle. I am sure she looks a good ten years older than I do, poor soul! And after her came Mr. Ludlow."

"Yes? and what did you say to him, what did he say to you?"

"Nothing. Because I turned the ponies' heads round and fled before they saw me."

"You went away? without speaking to them? well, I do call that stupid!"

"Oh, of course, I knew you would say I had done the wrong thing, whatever I did, but if I had stopped, what was I to say pray, to Mr. Jack Ludlow? was I to give him your love and tell him you would be very thankful to whistle him back again if you knew how? was I to ask him to come and call on you to meet Major Lawley, for whose sweet sake I suppose you were goose enough to throw him over, three years ago?"

"Be quiet, aunt. What is the use of saying those insulting things to me."

"Well, my dear, are they not true? Of course, I don't pretend to understand what really happened between you and Mr. Ludlow—whatever it was, you played your cards very badly, but you always will make a mess of things, because you put no real heart into anything. You behaved badly to him, but you have behaved fifty times worse to poor Hugh Lawley. I am really quite sorry for that man, for he really cares for you, whereas you do not care for him, not one snap!" and Mrs. George flicked her finger and thumb together in the air in illustration of her simile.

Agnes listened in silence with a frown upon her brow. It did not at all suit her to be scolded; at the same time, she was not prepared to enter into any explanations of the past to her aunt.

"If you only knew your own mind," continued Mrs. George.

"I do know my own mind," answered her niece, in a low voice.

Mrs. George sat up with awakened interest. "Then in that case my dear, for heaven's sake act upon the knowledge fairly and squarely. If you have an irresistible desire to become a poor man's wife, why don't you settle it at once and marry poor Major Lawley? I am sure your father, dear excellent man, would make no objection if you were to give him to understand that you cared for the man."

"Papa! good Heaven's what does papa know about things?" cried Miss Verinder contemptuously. "There is no difficulty about him—as long as he is let alone and not bothered when he is reading, he will consent to anything."

"Then you *do* intend to marry Hugh Lawley?" said Mrs. George suggestively, glancing keenly at her.

Agnes laughed. "My dear, stupid, old auntie! do you suppose I have taken leave of my senses?" then, after a moment's pause, she added quite seriously, "If you wish to know, I have made up my mind to become Lady Castlemere."

"Have you? you will have to be very clever about it then!"

And let me tell you, my dear, you haven't a ghost of a chance unless you send Major Lawley to the right about—to go on playing fast and loose with that man is fatal to your own interests, to say nothing of the innate dishonesty and cruelty of it, which does not, I suppose, affect you much."

"Not in the very least. But be easy, dear Aunt George, I am going to do what you wish. I am five-and-twenty, I cannot afford to play any longer, it is serious earnest now. Now that Jack has come back, I do not mean to waste my time any more. I am tired of this life we have been leading together, you and I. I want to settle down, and I mean to do it. Poor Hugh must be sacrificed—it will be a real relief to me to get rid of him. He bores me insufferably, poor fellow!"

She flung herself down again in the hammock and closed her eyes, as though to close the conversation. There was a flush of excitement on her face, and her heart beat high with new hopes and schemes. She did not want to talk any longer, only to think and plan out things in her own mind.

The elder woman too sat silent. She was a worldly woman, and her aims in life had never been high—but she was not devoid of a certain honesty of purpose, and her heart was not hardened into self-love, as was the heart of her niece.

"Why is she so beautiful?" thought Mrs. George to herself, as she glanced at the perfect form and face beside her. "If God had given her a sallow complexion and a squint in her eyes, she would not have had the power to injure other people with her narrow selfish soul! Who does she love, I wonder? Not her father, who has always indulged her, and let her do exactly as she liked—not me, who have slaved and toiled and worn myself out, taking her about from morning till night, humouring all her caprices, and putting up with all her impertinences! Not poor Lawley, who has adored her and fed her vanity for over four years, and most assuredly she does not love Jack Ludlow either! I don't believe she ever possessed one warm or generous instinct towards a single fellow-creature! a mass of cold-hearted selfishness—that is what she is!"

The object of her censuring thoughts, lay silent in the swaying hammock with closed eyes.

Presently Mrs. George got up and went back into the house.

In the hall she met Major Lawley, who was just coming in from a long hot ride to a neighbour's house, eight miles off, where Agnes had despatched him, with some trivial message.

"Where is Agnes?" he said to Mrs. George, "is her headache better?"

"Had she a headache? I didn't know it—you will find

her in the garden, in the hammock." The young man was striding off through the open window, when Mrs. George called him back

"Wait a moment, Major Lawley, I have something to say to you." He stopped with scarcely concealed impatience.

"Look here, we have been always good friends, you and I, haven't we?"

"You have always been a friend to me, Mrs. George."

"Very well, then will you forgive me for giving you a piece of unpalatable advice? You guess what I am going to say? It is about Agnes; be a man, and leave her! she does not care for you—she will never marry you—"

"You wrong her. She has promised to marry me, if I will only be patient and wait her own time. You know I would wait for her for years, if she wished it!"

"She has promised to marry you?" repeated Mrs. George in surprise, "well then, my dear fellow, I advise you to keep her to that promise—refuse to wait, you have waited long enough surely. It is unworthy of your dignity as a man and a lover to submit to this playing fast and loose any longer. Ask her boldly, and if she loves you—"

A red flush mounted to his face. The advice was good, the censure was well merited. Hugh Lawley knew that he cut but a sorry figure in wasting the best years of his life in the pursuit of a phantom hope. Yet he believed better things of her than did her aunt, and that was why he had borne with her.

"I think she does love me," he answered softly, looking away from her. "Thank you all the same, I know you are right. I will try and do as you advise me."

He went out into the sunny garden and crossed the lawn towards the place where the woman he loved so vainly, lay swinging gently under the shadow of the trees.

She was his queen, his ideal, his Idol! Alas, that human Idols should so often be so brittle! What he loved in her was not the real Agnes Verinder, whom he did not, in truth know at all, but another Agnes, a dream-woman, born and fashioned in his own brain after her outward likeness. A woman who was wild and wayward and capricious certainly, yet who with it all, was tender and true and womanly, and who above all, in her innermost heart, loved him—and him alone!

Poor deluded Hugh Lawley!

He came and sat down in the chair by her side, which Mrs. George had vacated, and touched her hand softly and reverently with his finger-tips. She opened her eyes and smiled at him. A sudden resolve came to him.

"Oh! so you have come back? well, was she in? What did she say? will she come over?"

"Never mind about that, Agnes, I have something serious to say to you. Very serious, I want to say it now, if I may?"

"Oh! how I hate serious things! it is too hot to be in earnest. Never mind, say on—or stay, I too, have something serious to say to you—shall I say my say first—or will you?"

"Just as you like, dearest. Yes, say your say first, if you like, my darling."

"Oh, you really must not call me that any more, Hugh—that is partly what I wanted to say to you."

"Not call you my darling? Why not? are you not my darling, Agnes?" he asked in pained wonder—"have you not promised to be my wife?"

"Now Hugh, you must be reasonable and sensible." She lifted herself up in her swinging couch and rested her chin on her elbow, facing him—he thought she had never looked more beautiful, and yet he remembered Mrs. George's warning, and his heart failed him a little—her glance was so cool, so steady, so even!

"Dear Hugh, do not be angry with me. We must end all this nonsense."

"It is not nonsense, Agnes!"

"Oh! yes it is, because you know I cannot marry you."

"Why not? Have you not promised me over and over again? It is time that you kept your promise. I cannot go on like this. You are destroying my manhood, my self-respect, my very life! End this cruel uncertainty and be my wife. It is what I wanted to say to you, to-day!"

He spoke hotly and breathlessly, with a passionate earnestness that must have moved her had she loved him. He put his arm about her, and tried to draw her to himself.

But Agnes knew better than to allow this. Gently but firmly she disengaged herself from his grasp.

"You must not do that please, Hugh. And you must listen to me. If at any time I have raised false hopes—"

"If!" he interrupted, bitterly.

She went on without heeding the interruption.

"I am sorry, very sorry, to have misled you. I cannot, I find, become your wife, and so, painful as it is to me to say it, I think our friendship had better end. You see people have begun to talk about us. I have been foolish, I own, for I have been very fond of you, and have allowed you to be more with me than was at all wise. You would not wish, I am sure, to compromise me."

"God forbid that I should injure your good name by my presence! But if you will marry me, dearest, all that will be at an end, and the evil tongues that have dared to slander you will be silenced."

“I cannot marry you, Hugh.” How gentle was the voice! how sad, how regretful its melodious tone! And yet, beneath the plaintive sweetness, there was a ring of inflexible and persistent obstinacy, an obstinacy of which he was conscious.

“Do not say you cannot!” he cried hotly and angrily. “Be honest, at least, and say at once that you *will* not!”

“If you like it better so,” she answered, still in that low and gentle voice.

A dead silence. Agnes played with the feathers of her fan, her eyes upon her fingers, her head turned a little away from him. And he looked at her, looked with hungry, devouring eyes, as a man looks his last at the dead face he loves, but is to see no more on earth.

“And that is your last word to me, Agnes, after all my patience, and all my love? You have nothing more to say to me but that you will not marry me?” he said, at length, drearily.

“Nothing. It is best to speak plainly, is it not?”

He rose slowly to his feet.

“Look at me,” he said. The sudden passion in his voice subdued her. Reluctantly and unwillingly she lifted her eyes. What she saw in his half frightened her.

“Listen to me. If you send me away now, remember that I will never come back, that I will never willingly see you again. I will go away out of the country, and I will forget you.”

“Yes,” she answered, coldly, “that will, perhaps, be best.”

“Then, in spite of all you have said, of your promises, of your kisses, of your words of love, you are false, and fickle, and cruel? But no, I will not believe it, you dare not deny your love! Speak the truth if you can, for once, from your heart, Agnes. Do you love me or no?”

Her eyes fell. For a moment she quailed and trembled. She was afraid of the storm she had evoked, and she was sorry, too. If she could have seen her way to it she would have kept him still; but there was Jack back at Castle Regis again, and, if she hoped for success with him, she must certainly rid herself of Hugh Lawley, at any cost. Suppose he should come to hear of any of these tales about him! She tightened her lips together, and hardened her heart.

“Yes or no, do you love me?” he said once more, with a certain savageness of passion.

Her lips framed themselves into a faint “No.” Then she dropped her face into her hands, and trembled, for she was frightened of the anger of which she dreaded the outburst.

She need not have been afraid. Hugh Lawley neither upbraided her, nor cursed her. He did what, perhaps, annoyed her far more. He simply turned round, and left her then and there without a single word.

When she found courage to look up again he was gone. In less than half an hour, without leaving any excuse or pretext of any sort, he had left the house, and she heard the wheels of the dog-cart he had ordered for himself grind across the gravel of the stable-yard, as she slowly went back across the garden.

Her aunt met her at the window with a scared face.

"Hugh Lawley has gone," she said to her. "You have sent him away!"

"Yes, I have done wisely, have I not?" she replied, composedly.

But that he should have left her like that, for ever, was, perhaps, more galling to her vanity than if he had called down the bitterest curses upon her head.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A HOUSE OF MOURNING.

Her fellow saints with busy care will look
For her blest name in Fate's eternal book,
And pleased to be outdone, with joy will see
Numberless virtues, endless charity.
So softly death succeeded life in her,
She did but dream of Heaven, and she was there.

—DRYDEN.

FOR years there had not been known such a hot summer. Day after day, for many weeks, the parched earth craved for rain in vain ; the burning sun rose and set in cloudless glory day after day, and the farmers shook their heads and sighed, and, in the parish churches, the parsons prayed that the drought might end. There was not even a breeze to cool the air ; the hay harvest was withered up for lack of moisture, and the grain would not swell in the ear, though the straw grew long and rank, and there were those who said that the wheat, and the oats, and the barley harvest would fail, too, as the hay had failed, and that there would be hard times for the country, and harder times for the poor in the coming winter. Then there came to pass worse things still, for the rivers ran low, and the springs were dried up ; and because there was no water, fever and sickness broke out both in the towns and in the low-lying country districts, so that many were ill, and many died.

One day Aunt Margaret had said to Madge :

"I would not let Johnny go into the village if I were you. I hear there is fever at those cottages down Church Lane."

"He never goes there, aunt. You know I have told Emmy Gates not to take him near the village at all."

Emmy Gates had been promoted to the proud position of attendant upon the little stranger boy. She was a good girl,

and very fond of little Johnny, but she was not quite immaculate, few maidens of seventeen are ; and if there was one thing on earth which Emmy loved, it was a gossip with a neighbour. Sometimes she had been known to stand at a cottage door for half-an-hour together, chattering to its mistress, whilst Johnny very naturally struck up infant friendships with the little cottage urchins who romped or rolled outside it in the dusty roads.

When Miss Margaret and Madge repeated to her once more that she was on no account to go into the village, and especially not to Church Lane, because some of the children there had caught the fever that was creeping about like a noisome reptile from village to village Emmy was frightened, and promised the ladies faithfully that she would never take Master Johnny anywhere in that direction.

“ He is not to play with any of the children at all, anywhere, remember Emmy,” added Madge, emphatically, and Emmy said she would remember.

But two days later, coming in by the cottage at the lodge on her homeward way, Emmy was hailed by the lodge-keeper’s wife, who, with a cloud of small white-headed beings clinging to her skirts, called out to her to come in and have a chat and a cup of tea on her way back to the Hall. Emmy did not see that the lodge cottage had any connection with the village or Church Lane, and Mrs. Trimmer was very fond of Johnny and always took a deep interest in him, because it was she who had picked him up, a wailing little bundle of humanity, a few weeks old, when he had been left upon her doorstep now more than three years ago. Consequently she always considered herself privileged to talk to him a great deal, and to stop him when he went by, to give him a glass of milk or a slice of bread and jam from her own tea-table, and she took a lively interest in his growth and general advancement in life.

“ If it hadn’t been for me,” she was wont to remark, “ that there blessed boy might ‘ave perished upon the doorstep. ’Twas I as picked him up and wrapped my old check shawl round ‘im, and carried ‘im straight up to the ‘all and gived ‘im to the ladies, and it’s my belief as if I ‘adn’t a spoke up for ‘im, Miss Durham, she’d ‘ave sent ‘im off to the workhus.”

For of course Mrs. Trimmer could not possibly know how Madge, on that eventful morning, had, like the mother of Moses amongst the bulrushes, crouched trembling behind the laurel shrubs opposite, watching with a beating heart and straining eyes to see what would be done with the living treasure thus cast upon Mrs. Trimmer’s hands.

“ Now I do wonder who that child belonged to ! ” Mrs. Trimmer would often say to Emmy ; “ ‘e be a lovely boy—

and if I hadn't have had all them childer already, to say nothing of the twins as was then well on their way, why I'd 'ave liked to 'ave kept 'im mysel."

"Come in, Emmy, my dear, and have a cup of tea," she called out to the little handmaiden as she went by, "and 'ows my blessed boy to-day? 'Ere you, Charlie and Frankie, and Cissy, come and play with Master Johnny, and show 'im the new kittens in the tool-house."

Emmy went in, of course, and Johnny was marched off to the back of the cottage by a trio of chubby little children with yellow heads and dirty faces to inspect an infant family of new-born kittens.

Emmy did have a moment of hesitation and a fleet remembrance of her promise to her ladies, but she stifled her conscience by the reflection that Mrs. Trimmer's children were not like the children in the village, where she had been forbidden to go, and that there was no fever in the cottage by the lodge gates to be afraid of.

Alas, twenty-four hours later this could no longer be said!

Cissy and Frankie, who had romped with their little visitor, merrily and noisily, for half-an-hour or more, up and down the tiny paths of the little back garden, were stricken down the next day by the insidious foe, and lay helpless and sick unto death in the tiny garret chamber.

"The lodge children have the fever," said Aunt Margaret, coming breathlessly into the nursery when she heard the news the next morning. "Doctor Wells has been there—he says it's typhus like the others."

Madge's heart sank. "It has come very close to us!" she said: "but Johnny has never been with them. Emmy, you have kept your word to me, of course, and have not let him play with any children?"

And then poor Emmy bowed her face upon her hands and burst into a passion of bitter weeping, and confessed the truth.

The boy had played with these very little ones who were now ill, for half-an-hour, only yesterday!

Madge turned very white; but there was nothing to be done—nothing, save to hope and pray! She did not reproach Emmy, indeed the poor girl was so utterly miserable that no amount of reproaches could have rendered her more wretched than she was already—but for three days she never let the boy out of her sight by day or night.

The heat was very great—it was impossible to go out in the middle of the day; and there was no air, only a steaming dampness, more fatal even than the drought, began to rise towards the evenings out of the hot bosom of the earth.

For two days the child played about as usual in his own nursery, and in the shady garden when the afternoons began

to wane. He was as bright and merry as ever, and Madge began to still her fears as groundless.

On the third day he was languid and irritable ; he did not seem to care for his toys, and turned away from his food.

On the fourth day he was taken ill.

Madge was downstairs with her aunts in the drawing-room ; she had only just left him because the old lady had called to her to help her with her knitting. She was standing before her chair, winding a ball of worsted off the skein upon the long, hawk-like hands, and chafing impatiently at the moments she was thus forced to spend away from the child, for at her heart she was secretly uneasy.

Suddenly Wilson entered the room.

“Would you please go upstairs at once, mam,” he said, with a certain agitation, addressing himself to Aunt Margaret ; “Emmy Gates is afraid the little boy is ill.”

The skein of wool fell off her hands. Miss Margaret jumped hastily up from the writing-table. Madge, white and trembling, was half-way across the room to the door, when, in a stentorian voice, the old lady cried out :

“Stop !”

“I cannot—I must go to Johnny.”

“Madge, I forbid you to go. Wilson, prevent Miss Madge from leaving the room.”

Wilson’s portly frame blocked the doorway with stolid imperturbability. If there was to be a shindy between the ladies Wilson was very glad that he was there to take a part in it.

“Stand aside, Wilson,” cried Madge frantically, “I tell you I must go—the boy is ill—it may be the fever—I *will* go to him.”

“That is the very reason I say you will *not* go to him !” answered the old lady. She had risen to her feet, and stood with one bony-fingered hand outstretched towards her great-niece. “Do you suppose I am going to allow you to rush into infection for a beggar’s brat who does not belong to us ? If that child has the fever he goes right out of the house at once to the Hospital—I am not going to keep him here—”

“You could not be so wicked—so cruel !” gasped Madge.

“How dare you speak to me like that, Madge, and pray where is the cruelty ? For a whim of yours and Margaret’s I have sheltered and fed that child for more than three years—and this is the gratitude you show me ! I am not going to run the risk of getting typhus fever at my age, and I am not going to allow my nieces to go near him ; we owe him nothing—he is no relation to us. I shall send for Doctor Wells and have him taken at once to the Hospital.”

“Then I will go with him—I will not leave him. You say he is no relation to us, aunt, but—”

Quick as thought Aunt Margaret had slipped behind her and silenced her by a warning hand upon her shoulder. She saw the evil smile of suspicion on Wilson's fat, servile face, and the uplifting of the old lady's eyebrows.

"What a singular excitement for a young lady of your age!" said Miss Durham sneeringly. "Dear me, what *can* make you take it to heart in this way? This child's illness concerns you, I suppose, no more than it does all of us. Why should you get so excited?"

"For heaven's sake be silent," whispered Aunt Margaret; "you will lose everything if you are not careful. I will go to the boy—trust to me," and then aloud she said to Wilson:

"Miss Madge will not leave the room, you need not stand there any longer. I will go and send off a messenger at once for Doctor Wells and will take every possible precaution against infection. Perhaps"—turning to Miss Durham—"it may not be the fever after all, aunt, the heat is quite enough to upset a little child. Madge will stay here with you, of course—she is so fond of Johnny, you must excuse her, dear aunt—it is only natural. I will see you presently, Madge."

She left the room, closing the door carefully after her, and Madge sank down in her despair upon the nearest seat.

"Get up and go on winding my worsted, Madge," said the harsh old voice of the family autocrat.

Madge obeyed mechanically—but there was an agonised expression upon her white face.

The old woman watched her furtively.

"If ever a niece of mine were to disgrace herself and fling the honour of my family into the mud," she observed presently and with meaning, "I should turn her, penniless, out of my house, and I should see her starve to death sooner than give her a loaf of bread."

Madge answered nothing. Indeed her suspense and anxiety were for the moment so terrible that she only vaguely understood the meaning of the old woman's threat.

When would she hear?—when would Aunt Margaret come back to her? that was all her thought. And yet she knew that to own her child as, in her despair, she had been on the point of doing a moment ago, would be to place herself and him in a position of the gravest difficulty. Aunt Durham suspected the truth already, if she were to know it for a certainty she would never forgive her—the blow to her family pride would be unpardonable. For Johnny's sake she must not throw prudence to the winds.

It seemed long before Aunt Margaret came back. When she did she was calm and apparently cheerful.

"I do not think you need be alarmed, Aunt Durham," she said, purposely ignoring Madge. "Emmy's account is not

very serious—she tells me that the boy is hot and feverish—it may be nothing. I have given orders that he is to be completely isolated at the top of the house, and I have sent for the doctor. When he comes we shall know better—meanwhile Emmy will attend on him."

"You have not seen the child yourself?"

Aunt Margaret uttered the first deliberate lie she had ever spoken in her life, and said she had not seen him. It was one of those untruths of which the motive is so noble, that it is more pardonable than the truth.

Aunt Durham was comforted and reassured, and forgot to be terrified about the infection. When Madge left the room with Aunt Margaret, she was quite prepared to trust them both. In fact that they should dare to disobey her, did not enter her mind.

"If he is not very ill, and you can isolate him from the rest of the household and let no one but one person go near him, he need not be sent to the hospital," she said graciously.

"You see what being prudent has achieved already," said Aunt Margaret, when they were outside the door. "She has given us leave to keep him."

"But I must go to him, aunt. I cannot leave him to Emmy," cried Madge.

"Emmy is gone. I have sent her to her mother. She was of no use. I am going to nurse him myself. He is in my room. You will trust him to me, Madge?"

"Oh, Aunt Margaret! You are, indeed, good! But may I not go to him at all?"

"No, dear child. Be guided by me. There is so much at stake, and her suspicions are very difficult to deal with, as it is. Let me have the care of him. I am certain that it is only a slight attack. You know I am as good as a doctor, myself, and I am sure that there are no serious symptoms about the child."

"But if he should get worse!" cried Madge, wringing her hands together in anguish.

"Then I promise that you shall go to him. Trust him to me. Aunt Durham will never discover that he is in my room, and if you are with her all day she will be pacified and easy in her mind. She is not really hard-hearted and she is fond of the child. It is much, that she has allowed us to keep him here. Doctor Wells will help me to tranquillize her."

Aunt Margaret was right. Little Johnny's attack was, fortunately, not a very severe one. His constitution was healthy, and he shook off the disease quickly and easily. On the seventh day he was already well enough to be lifted out of bed and to sit for a little while by the window in an arm-

chair. The fever had left him, he was only weak, and white, and wasted. Little Frankie, at the lodge, who had been fat, and rosy, and strong, lay dead in his narrow coffin, but Johnny, who had always been a slender, delicate-looking child, recovered quickly ; the fever had been powerless to crush out his fragile life.

If that had been all ! If, having stricken this tiny blossom and failed to crush it beneath his footsteps, the fever-fiend had been content to pass onwards from the red-brick house amongst the meadows, to work his deeds of destruction in other homes and in other places !

But alas ! the demon stayed his departure to claim another victim.

For a week Aunt Margaret had sat up the whole night long with little Johnny, scarcely leaving his bedside all the time that he had been ill.

When he was better she was overworked and exhausted. The continued heat—the poisoned air of the sick room—the anxiety of her position with regard to Madge and to her aunt—all told on her, and weakened her, rendering her an easy prey to the foe.

Aunt Margaret fell ill with the fever in her turn.

Those were dark days that followed quickly upon one another in that stricken house.

All at once they all realised, from Aunt Durham herself down to the poorest cottager in the village, that she who lay ill in her darkened chamber in Fairmead Hall, fighting out the unequal battle with the Angel of Death, was the very soul, and life, and goodness of the place. To her they had all turned in trouble and in difficulty, in her womanly tenderness and sympathy they had trusted, on her wise advice and help they had rested. There was not a man, woman or child, in the whole parish of Fairley who had not, at some time or other, had occasion to bless Miss Margaret for her goodness.

And so, when it became known that she was past hope, and the white, virginal life of unselfish devotion was to be taken away from the quiet centre where she had for so many years held her place amongst them, there went up a great wail of dismay and sorrow from every living heart that had ever known her.

No one had seemed to understand until now that she was going to leave them, how valuable and how precious that gentle influence had been, and no one, until she was actually gone, realized the blank that she would leave behind her. It seemed, now that her homely face and figure was never more to be seen moving quietly amongst them on deeds of unobtrusive kindness and compassion, as if anyone might have been easier spared than this little old maid, with her

unlovely face and simple mind, and her beautiful soul of angelic sympathy and goodness.

She had comforted the sorrowful, and had been tender to the sinner, they had come to her, and looked to her, in their troubles, as a matter of course, and scarcely, perhaps, had they valued her as they might have done. But now, all at once, they saw what she had done for them, and what a life of loving unselfishness she had led amongst them.

And if the people felt it in this way, how much more poignant was the grief of the two women she left behind her!

In all her life no such sorrow as this had ever come to Aunt Durham.

When they told her on the fourteenth day that her niece was unconscious and was past hope of recovery, Aunt Durham, with angry rebellion, refused at first to believe it—it was not possible that Margaret could die!

Then, although she had been afraid to come near her before, she had desired her servants to carry her upstairs into the sick room. Regardless of that infection she had dreaded so much, she took up her place by the still white bed, where poor Margaret lay in a helpless stupor, and there she sat until the end came. Madge, who had never left her aunt's side since she was taken ill, was drowned in floods of tears. Her face was pale and disfigured with her woe, her eyes haggard with sleeplessness and misery, but old Aunt Durham shed never a tear.

All her hopes, and plans and prejudices—all her pride of family, and all her belief in the prophecy to which she had pinned her faith, lay perishing upon that narrow deathbed. She had worked out her hard and selfish theories in the person of her niece, she had moulded her to her whims and crushed her down into the narrow lines which she had laid down for her existence, and now the creature which she had trained and tamed, was about to escape her—and to die!

And after her own manner, she had loved her—loved her chiefly because she had been necessary to her, and because she had imbued her gentler and more receptive nature with the impress and reflection of her own vigorous personality.

That she should die, was absolute despair to her.

Madge, broken-hearted and weeping, was losing her only friend—her only counsellor in difficulty—her only help in the dark prospect of her future—but to Aunt Durham the loss was even more terrible. It was the shipwreck of her whole scheme of existence.

The old lady never spoke a word to her great-niece during those hours when they waited for the end, one on either side of Aunt Margaret's deathbed.

Her face was set, and stern, and dark, and she paid no heed to the sobbing girl opposite her. She never even looked at her. Her eyes were fixed upon the face of the dying woman.

Once, before the end, the pale lips moved and the unconscious eyelids opened. The old woman bent down eagerly to listen. There was no recognition in the faded, unseeing eyes, and the faint, voiceless word breathed from the stiff, white lips was only a name—a name out of the long ago of Aunt Margaret's past—a name which Miss Durham remembered well, but which she had never thought to hear again.

"Percival!" said the dying woman—and then again after a long pause, "My dear, dear Percival!"

It was the lover of her youth, from whom her aunt had parted her!

After that she never spoke again.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FRIENDLESS AND HOMELESS.

Alone!—that worn-out word
So idly spoken and so coldly heard;
Yet all that poets sing, and grief hath known
Of hopes laid waste, knells in that word—Alone!

—BULWER LYTTON.

"BUT for you she would not have died!"

"For me!—Oh! Aunt Durham you are indeed cruel and unjust!"

"I am not unjust. What I say is the truth. Do not stand crying there. Listen to me; it is that child who brought the infection into the house and who gave it to her. Now I find out from the servants that, to satisfy you, she nursed him in her own room. She sacrificed her life, the life that I valued and loved, in order to nurse that wretched child! It were better far if he had died and that she had lived."

The blinds were drawn closely down over the windows, and in the twilight greyness of the darkened room, the two women could scarcely discern each other's faces.

It was the first time that Miss Durham had spoken to her great-niece since their common sorrow, and Aunt Margaret was still lying upstairs in her flower-strewn coffin, with the cold, sweet smile of Eternity upon her face.

It was the day before the funeral, and Miss Durham had bidden Wilson to summon Madge into her presence.

She rose from her deep chair at her entrance and stood facing her, gaunt, and lean, and awful, in her grief and anger.

All the misfortunes which had fallen upon her seemed to

have come to her through her younger niece. She had never loved her as she had loved the other, because she had never succeeded in subduing her to her own imperious fancies. Now, she was determined to set things upon a different footing. Aunt Margaret had been too tender-hearted, and had spoilt the child by over indulgence, but there should be no more spoiling now.

If Madge was to be her heiress and become the mistress of Fairmead Hall at her death, she must conform to her system of life.

Aunt Durham knew certain details about Madge's past which gave her an insight into a great many things which had never been mentioned between them. For the honour of her own name she had no wish to drag her hidden secrets into the light of day. Let them by all means be ignored and forgotten. She had no wish to brand the girl with shame, or to publish a scandal to the whole country side. But then she must be submissive and bow to the conditions which she saw fit to impose upon her.

Margaret's death had been a rude shock to the old woman, and she had blamed herself in that, by deviating ever so little from her established principles, she had in a measure opened the way for the disaster which had overtaken her.

There must be no more of yielding and indulgence. Madge must be broken upon the wheel of her will as her poor aunt had been before her.

"I did wrong in permitting that child to live in the house," said Aunt Durham to herself, when she thought it over—"if it had been a girl, it would not have mattered, but no sooner do women admit a male creature into the inner circle of their lives, than mischief and sorrow follow of themselves. Look at the harm this boy has already done to me! but for him Margaret would have been alive."

Then she had sent for her great-niece in order to speak her mind to her.

"Listen to me, Madge. I do not wish to be unduly hard upon you for the past. All that I desire is that we should understand one another for the future. By the lamentable death of your dear aunt you will see that you are now my sole heiress. The house and estate, together with my savings, which are considerable, which I had left in my will to your Aunt for her life, to devolve if she thought fit, upon you in your turn, will now come entirely to you upon my death."

"You are very good to me, Aunt," murmured Madge humbly.

"As to being good, it remains to be seen whether you will think so when I have explained to you all my views. But at any rate that is what is my present intention concerning

my property. It is indeed a bitter grief to me that it is impossible that the old prophecy relating to the 'three old maids of Fairmead,' can now be carried out in this generation. I had hoped that I had lived to see its fulfilment, but alas—it was not to be! It may be, that it is reserved for you to discover a third maiden of our family to whom you will be able to bequeath the inheritance which I shall leave you—carefully tied up so that you may not squander it—I must study the old family papers to see if I can find any new guidance under these altered circumstances."

Madge again murmured her thanks. A sense of gratitude came to her. Johnny's future at any rate was safe.

"Of course," continued the old lady after a brief pause, "of course you will never marry—that is naturally the primary condition I shall lay down to your becoming my heiress."

Madge started; in the dim light she hoped her aunt would not see the sudden flush that sprang into her face.

"I am never likely to marry," she answered in a low voice.

"No, of course not. But there is another stipulation which I must make, and which it is my intention to carry out at once. I am an old woman Madge—in the course of nature it will not be very long before you will come into my place. Before I die I desire to set my house in order. That boy must be sent away."

"The boy! Oh, no—impossible! You cannot mean it!" The words were almost a cry. She clasped her hands entreatingly, her eyes grew wild with terror, her heart beat violently.

"Pray calm yourself, Madge, there is nothing to get excited about. The boy has been a little amusement to you I know and you are fond of him; but I did foolishly in allowing you and poor Margaret to keep him in the house, and you see we have lived to regret it, for it is owing to him that this terrible affliction has befallen us. In any case I never intended that he should live here always, and the time has come when I have determined to send him away."

With a cry of despair Madge fell upon her knees before her, clutching at her crape-covered skirts with her trembling hands.

"Oh, no, Aunt, do not send him away! I cannot, cannot lose him! I do not want your money—leave it to whom you like—and I will work for you like a servant day and night—the child shall never come near you, or trouble you since you dislike him so—only for pity's sake let me keep him."

"Get up, Madge and don't make yourself ridiculous by this theatrical exhibition," said the old woman sternly. "I don't want to leave my money to anyone but to you, and I

don't want you to work like a servant—I have plenty of servants—and as to disliking poor little Johnny, of course I don't dislike him at all ! poor little brat, why should I ? he is a nice little boy, and I mean to provide for his future. There is an establishment for orphan boys at Birmingham to which I am going to send him. When he is old enough, he will be apprenticed to a trade, and taught to earn his living, and I shall pay twenty pounds a year for his support until he is old enough to do so. I have had very nice letters about the place from the chaplain ; and on Thursday next I intend to send Wilson with him to Birmingham, and he will deliver him safely up to the Matron at the Home. He will be as happy as possible there."

"Aunt Durham, I entreat, I implore you not to take him from me ! it will kill me—he is all I have to live for—I cannot, I will not be parted from him. Where he goes, I must go too."

"Do not be ridiculous, Madge ! and get up from your knees !" Madge rose slowly and wearily ; her face was wet with tears, her bright hair was rough and disordered, her tottering limbs seemed scarcely able to support her. She sank despairingly into a chair.

"You talk great nonsense, my dear," continued Aunt Durham not unkindly. "I can scarcely send you to a home for orphan boys with him, I suppose !"

"Oh, do not send him away ! or else give me the twenty pounds you have promised, and I will go and live in some town where I can work for my living and support him."

"Madge, you are very silly. A Miss Durham of Fairmead does not work for her bread like a seamstress. You must know that you are talking wildly. Say no more about it, I have determined that the child must go—"

"But he shall not go !" she cried wildly. "You have no right to him—it is I who have a right—it is I—"

"Hush, Madge !" interrupted Miss Durham sternly. "Do not speak words of shame and disgrace which you would for ever repent of ! Let it be enough for you that I know your secret—"

"*You know—?*" she repeated faintly.

"I know this much, my dear, that in spite of all my care and all my training, you once so far forgot your womanhood as to encourage the vile attentions of a wicked and profligate man. I do not wish to drag your degradation into the light of day, I will not blight your name, nor will I bring shame upon you, for there are some things which it is best to be silent about, and I believe that you have suffered enough already. You have learnt for yourself the lesson which I strove in vain to teach you. You have seen what the love of man does for a woman. How he seeks his own

evil gratifications only, how he deceives and betrays the foolish creature who trusts in him, and how in the end he leaves her to bear the consequences of her folly in a life-long remorse and humiliation."

Madge had fallen forward across the sofa burying her face amongst the cushions.

Why, oh why, was she powerless to refute these cruel accusations ! Why could she not rise up and say, " It is false, there is neither shame nor disgrace, he was my husband, and I was his wife, and there is no disgrace in married love !" But alas ! that letter in which he had resigned her for another, hung ever before her eyes like the sword of fate betwixt her and the truth—and the conviction that he had tricked her into a marriage which was no marriage at all, sealed her lips through her love for him, lest she should be the means of his destruction.

She could answer nothing. She could only suffer and be silent, and Aunt Margaret who alone had known all, and had believed in her, was no longer there to stand by her and advise her.

In an anguish of self-abasement, she listened to her aunt's cruel words of defamation, and yet was powerless to deny them or to defend herself. There was no excuse, no explanation possible to her. The fate that had overtaken her was as strong as death, and cruel as the grave. There was no struggling against it. Jack Ludlow had, indeed, deserted and forsaken her ! And, in the face of that stupendous fact, nothing that she could say or do, seemed to be of use.

Only she wondered vaguely, even in that hour of misery, how, and where, Aunt Durham had learnt all this ? Who had told her ? Where had she gathered all her information ? What had opened her eyes to the tragedy of her life, to which she had been so blindly unconscious four years ago ?

It was a mystery which she could not fathom.

" There is only one indulgence which I will extend to you, Madge," resumed Miss Durham after a pause ; " and it is the last that you must ever expect of me. As I know you are fond of this poor little boy, who, remember, is *never* to be spoken about between us in future !—who is no relation to us at all, only a waif whom your aunt was kind enough to support out of charity—remember this ! Well, then I will give you one little pleasure. As I daresay you will like to see the place he is going to, and to talk to the matron about his little childish ailments, you shall take him yourself to Birmingham, instead of Wilson.

Madge looked up quickly—a new thought awoke suddenly in her mind.

" I will give you the first quarter's money to pay in to the

secretary, and you will take a return ticket and come back again the same evening. You must, of course, take one of the maids with you, and you must go on Thursday because I have arranged that he is to be received at the Home that day. Would you like to do this, Madge?"

"Yes, aunt," she answered quietly, but her heart was beating wildly.

"You will have to change at the junction, and get into the Birmingham train, you will have no other change. I will make out your journey for you. And you may take all little Johnny's clothes and toys with him—he may as well have them—and some cakes and jam too, so you can pack a good box full of things for him. I am glad to see that you are ready to meet me half-way, Madge, and I hope there will be no more rebellion in your heart against my wishes."

Drawing the girl's pale face towards her, she kissed her coldly on the forehead and dismissed her.

"I have managed her beautifully I consider," said the old woman to herself after Madge had gone away. "It was a good move letting her perceive that I guessed her secret, it frightened her. It is certainly true, and I have pieced all the ends of the story together correctly. Those young men on the river that summer, the letters that used to come for her, and then the mysterious appearance of the child! Oh, it is all plain enough, and terrible enough too, but these things are always the man's fault more than the woman's, and I consider that not even my poor dear Margaret herself, could have dealt more leniently with her, or have won her over more kindly to my wishes than I have done."

But clever as she thought herself, there was one thing concerning which old Miss Durham was in an outer darkness of total, and utter ignorance.

For she did not understand the instincts of a mother's heart. She did not know that the maternal element will be stronger than all else in her, that it will teach her to do and to dare that which without it, would be beyond her powers: that her love will over-ride all difficulties and brave all dangers, and that there will be no course too intricate or too perilous for her to embark upon, so long as her child's welfare and benefit depends upon it.

The moment Madge left her aunt's presence, she made up her mind that that journey to Birmingham with her boy should be her golden opportunity of saving him.

She was almost happy, indeed, when she thought how easily Aunt Durham had played into her hands, and had given her the power of escaping from her with him. The only thing that troubled her was the money. She did not like to take five pounds given to her to pay to the matron of the home at Birmingham, and to spend it in another way.

It seemed dishonest. Still, she comforted herself by thinking that she would certainly pay it back some day.

She went to her room, and with her own hands packed a large box full of her own and the child's things. Clothes enough to last them both for a year.

During the day her heart often failed her, her project seemed to be so vast, and her own capacity for facing the world so small. How was she to set about this great thing which she was going to do? how was she to understand what would be best for her to embark upon, and what were the first steps that she must take?

She remembered that she was not only young in years, but also terribly young in her ignorance and her inexperience. The peaceful and easy training of her life had not taught her how to grapple with want and necessity—she, who had never since her childhood even seen a large city, who had always been accustomed to the simplicity and peace of a country home—how was she to face, alone and unaided, all the unknown perils and dangers of a crowded metropolis? She did not even know, save in some vague dreams of her early childhood before her parents' death, what the streets of London looked like; and yet it was amongst them that she was prepared to launch the frail bark of her fate.

If only Aunt Margaret had been alive to help and to advise her! But Aunt Margaret was dead and she had no friend—not one!

Then all at once a sudden memory returned to her.

No friend? yes, surely there was one! One, who, long ago had been kind to her, who had looked unspoken love for her out of eyes that were neither handsome nor romantic, but that had surely been honest and true eyes, all the same.

She remembered Lance Parker, remembered that she had promised if ever she were in need to come to him, and that he had said he would always be her friend.

Well, her need was sore enough now, and the time was come when he could indeed help her if he would.

He would be able to give her a start no doubt, would put her in the way of earning her living, and tell her where she might safely go for shelter and for food.

No sooner had she thought of him than she felt a great sense of relief and an infinite trust in him. He would not fail her! Other men might, as Aunt Durham said, be cruel and deceitful, but surely Lance Parker was honest and true.

She found the little card he had given her long ago lying at the bottom of her dressing-case, where she had placed it at the time. And she wrote at once to the address upon it, and slipped out when it got dark to post it herself in the village post box.

After that she was happier, and no sooner was the sad day of the funeral over, than she quickly completed her preparations for flight.

Luckily for her, the housemaid whom her aunt had decided was to go with her to Birmingham was a young woman whose private history was well known to Madge.

Jane had a lover, and that lover was employed in a saw mill close to Fairley Junction. Jane was easily persuaded that to spend the day at the Junction with her young man, who could without much difficulty, she thought, get a half holiday for the occasion, would be far more amusing than to accompany her young mistress to Birmingham and back.

"I shall not want you in Birmingham, at all, Jane," said Madge to her when she made the welcome proposal to her, "and you can meet me at the Junction in the evening and return home with me. It must be a little secret between us, and I daresay your William will be delighted to see you."

"I am sure, Miss, I don't know how ever to thank you enough. Miss Durham never will let my young man come to see me. He will be so pleased, for you know, Miss, for all Miss Durham tells us the men are so wicked and girls had better not keep company, and are very silly ever to marry, I have quite made my mind up to get married next year, when William expects to get his wages raised."

"Quite right, Jane, and I hope that you will be very happy," and then from her slender store she gave the girl a sovereign and bade her put it into her money-box to help to buy her wedding-gown.

Two days later an afternoon train came steaming slowly into Paddington Station, bearing amongst its third-class passengers, a timid and very anxious-looking young lady, and a little white-faced and brown-eyed boy.

As the train drew up, she looked out eagerly along the platform. There was a crowd of people; a great many porters hurrying along by the carriage doors, and a tangled background of cabs and carriages, amongst which she could distinguish nothing clearly.

She got out of the train, holding the little boy by the hand, and looked vaguely about her. No one came forward to meet her—no well-remembered, portly form shouldered its way amongst the crowd, no freckled, red face welcomed her with a beaming smile.

"He will be here presently," she said to herself. "He is sure to come. He cannot fail me!"

But the crowd dispersed, and the cabs laden with luggage drove noisily away, and still he did not come.

"Shall I put your box on a cab, miss?" enquired the porter who had gone to find her luggage for her.

She assented mutely, but still she waited. Johnny was tired and hungry, and began to cry. The platform was empty. She could not wait any longer.

At last she got into the cab.

"Where to, miss?" said the porter, touching his cap at the window, as he slammed the ricketty door upon her.

"I do not know. Tell him to drive on," she answered miserably.

She was alone in the world !

CHAPTER XXV.

AN EVENTFUL MEETING.

"Perhaps it is pretty to force together
Thoughts so all unlike each other,
To mutter and mock a broken charm."

—COLERIDGE.

THURSDAY was market day in the town of Northminster, and on market day, no less to see one another and to gossip, than to make their purchases, the squires and squiresSES of the neighbourhood were wont to drive into the town from all directions, to put up their family coaches and horses at the "Royal George" hostelry, and to spread themselves over the principal streets of the town, frequently with no other object save to meet their friends and pick up any odds and ends of gossip that might be flying about.

A great central meeting place on these occasions was Mr. Jakes, the librarian's, shop. Jakes' commanded a fine view of the square market place, being situated at the north-east corner thereof, looking across the old fountain in the centre, surmounted with its cross in antique iron work, to the Town Hall, with its picturesquely-gabled roof and handsome clock-tower, which occupied the whole of its southern side.

People made *rendezvous* of all kinds at Jakes'. Servants were interviewed in the little back room behind the shop—parcels were left to be called for, letters and telegrams were taken in and kept till their owners came to ask for them, and all day long Mr. Jakes, himself, stood bowing and smiling, and washing his thin white hands in invisible soap behind the counter.

Mr. Jakes was a venerable old gentleman, with snow-white hair, and an aristocratic cast of countenance. He was a man of some amount of literary knowledge, and could recommend you which books to read, and tell you which were not worth reading, in his library. It was popularly supposed that he read them all himself. Anyhow, he pretended to know all about them. Nobody looked upon him in the light of an ordinary tradesman. He rather resembled a universal friend and adviser. He remembered the births

of most of the people who came into his shop, knew all about the marriages of their sons and daughters, recollected many of the old families who had been swept away and forgotten out of the old country houses, and could have told you the exact origin of those who had risen in the world upon the ruins of their predecessors.

Everybody went to Jakes for advice and assistance—from a boy in buttons to a pair of carriage-horses, from an Angola kitten to a high-class governess, he always knew where to lay his hand exactly upon the very thing that his enquirer was looking for. Nothing was too exalted for his mind to grasp, nothing too small to rivet his conscientious attention.

Mr. Jakes did not come much into the shop on ordinary days. He was too great a man for that. He usually sat in a private room of his own, where, however, anybody was free to come and consult him, but on market day he conceived it to be his duty to preside himself over his shop-people, and to be there to give a smile and a bow to all who entered.

Everybody turned in to have a chat with old Jakes, and from Lord Castlemere himself down to Farmer Hoggins, in his leathern breeches and gaiters he had a kindly word and a pleasant greeting for all.

One Thursday afternoon, Jakes, as usual, was in the shop, and a crowd of persons were coming and going through the open doorway.

It was, "Oh, Mr. Jakes, might I leave this parcel?" or "They are going to send some boots for me from Read's—would you let them stop here till the carriage calls, Mr. Jakes?" Or, "There will be a young woman to see me about the kitchen-maid's place; will you let her wait in the back parlour till I come back, Mr. Jakes?"

And to everything Jakes bowed and smiled, and washed his hands, and answered, "Certainly, ma'am."—"Certainly, sir."

Presently, in came Lady Mary Ludlow into the shop, and Jakes bowed lower than ever and smiled with genuine pleasure at the sight of her.

"Delighted, indeed, to see you at home again, my lady!"

"And so am I glad to be back, Mr. Jakes," and Lady Mary reached out her slender, grey-gloved hand across the counter, and shook hands heartily with the old man, who flushed with pleasure at the attention. "There is no place like home after all, and no faces like the old ones one has known all one's life," she added kindly.

"That's quite my opinion, too, my lady. No place like old England. But if I might make so bold as to say it, your stay in foreign parts has done you a world of good. You are looking wonderful well, my lady."

"I am very well, thank you, Mr. Jakes."

"And young Mr. Ludlow?"

"He is quite well. He will be here in a minute to pay his respects to you. He is looking up all his old friends. I left him at the Bank, talking to Mr. Scrivener, five minutes ago. He was to follow me here."

Jakes came round the counter to place a chair in a comfortable position for Lady Mary, and she was just beginning to tell him how he really must find a better cook for Lord Castlemere, as well as another footman and an under-house-maid, and Jakes, with his hands folded together midway between his chin and his waistcoat, was listening, with his bald head bent into an attitude of the deepest attention and interest, when a phaeton and a smart pair of cobs dashed noisily up to the door, and a moment later a tall and regally handsome young lady, clad in pale blue muslin came out of the sunshine without, into the dim coolness of the shop.

Lady Mary saw her before she was seen by her, and gave a little start, half turning her head away and pretending to examine some pocket-books which lay on the counter.

"Good morning, Mr. Jakes," said the new-comer carelessly. "Rather cooler than it was last market day, isn't it?"

"Yes, Miss Verinder. Those two days of rain has cooled the air wonderful. The heat was most oppressive, last week."

"Have you got that new book of Ouida's for me yet, Mr. Jakes?"

"I am expecting it from Town to-night, Miss, and I'll send it over to Deep Deane at once. I hope Sir Herbert is well? I haven't forgotten that edition of *Livy* he asked me to try and get for him. Would you mind telling him, Miss, that I've great hopes I shall succeed in finding what he wants in a short time?"

Agnes, who was turning over the leaves of an illustrated album, nodded carelessly. She did not care a brass farthing about the *Livy*, or about any of her father's wants, and scarcely heard the message that Jakes wished her to give to him.

"What is the price of this album, Mr. Jakes?" she said, cutting short his remarks somewhat abruptly, and then, turning round with the book in her hand, she became suddenly aware of the presence of Lady Mary Ludlow.

The two women looked at each other. For a moment the elder could not bring herself to say a word. Here was the girl who had ill-treated her son! How was it possible that she could look at her without resentment? But then common sense stepped in, and she remembered that in spite of her conduct, she still ardently desired that the beautiful

heiress should become her daughter-in-law. She rose from her chair and as she did so, Agnes, with the prettiest little confusion imaginable, met her with outstretched hands, and with a look of deprecation in her lovely eyes which would have melted a sterner heart than Lady Mary's.

"How good of you!" murmured Agnes, and there was a whole volume of apology and of regret in the simple words.

"My dear, you and I must always be friends," said Lady Mary in answer to all the unspoken things which she felt certain were in the girl's mind. "I was always fond of you—but you really did behave badly, Agnes."

Mr. Jakes had discreetly retired to a distant part of the shop.

Agnes lifted her eyes, they were full of a regretful melancholy—Lady Mary, in thinking it over afterwards, could almost have sworn that there had been tears in them, so deep and so touching was their sadness. A lovely blush rose to her face—a blush that seemed like maidenly modesty, but that was in truth nothing but the intense excitement of the situation—as she murmured :

"Do not judge me hardly. Perhaps, if you knew all——!" and then her eyelids fell, and the faint echo of a sigh rounded off the unfinished sentence.

Lady Mary, who was very far from knowing all, who, in point of fact, knew nothing at all about the reasons which had brought her son's engagement to Agnes to an end, felt the truth and justice of this remark ; she had always divined that the fault might very possibly have been mainly Jack's, however much the blame might rest upon Agnes.

To her keen, motherly eyes, Agnes seemed to be agitated and distressed, and, in spite of her great beauty, there was a certain shadow of sadness and of suffering in her face and manner, which could not fail to impress her favourably.

At that moment Agnes, who was facing the street door, drew suddenly back from her with a little exclamation of dismay, and turning rapidly away, began to examine the backs of the volumes upon the shelves of the circulating library ; Lady Mary, looking quickly round, perceived that her son had entered the shop.

It was a moment of extreme awkwardness for them all. Lady Mary was cruelly nervous as to what was going to happen. Agnes, grown wiser by experience, had made up her mind to play her cards this time in a totally different fashion, and had determined, come what might, that the first advances should not be from her ; and Jack, thus suddenly flung into the presence of the woman he had so ruthlessly thrown over, realised all at once how intensely disagreeable it is to an English gentleman to feel that he has behaved like a blackguard.

He looked feebly and helplessly towards his mother, for being, like a large majority of men, utterly destitute of that fine quality which is known as "moral courage," he naturally expected her to come to his help, and she, quickly understanding his mute appeal, dashed bravely and a little breathlessly into the breach.

"Here is an old friend of ours, Jack, who will like to be remembered by you."

At this Agnes turned round and, with downcast eyes, stood facing him. She did not offer to shake hands with him, and her under-lip trembled slightly.

To Lady Mary her attitude seemed full of modest penitence for the past. In Jack's eyes it very naturally resembled the injured pride of a woman who has been deeply wronged.

As a matter of fact, it was neither the one nor the other, only a very cleverly-contrived piece of acting.

"Won't you shake hands with me, Miss Verinder?" said Jack, very humbly, as he made a step towards her.

"If you wish it, Mr. Ludlow," answered Agnes, without lifting her eyes, and held out her hand to him.

"If you can ever forgive me——" began Jack in an agitated murmur that was inaudible to his mother.

"I have forgotten everything, Mr. Ludlow. Let the past rest—it *is* past!" And then she lifted those glorious eyes of hers, and allowed them for a brief moment to melt bewilderingly into his, ere she dropped them once more in the seeming confusion of maiden modesty. Upon which Jack instantly experienced a queer and unaccountable sense of regret and rebellion, and did not feel at all so certain that the past was indeed past—or that, in spite of all that had happened to him since he last parted with her, he did in very truth desire it to remain so.

Agnes drove her ponies home again that day, in a serene and self-satisfied frame of mind. She knew that she had come very well out of that meeting, and had earned, by her discretion, the good opinion both of the mother and the son.

There was to be no "rushing" of Jack now—no driving him headlong into an untenable position by the fictitious entanglement of his senses, and by propitious combinations of moonlight and melody. He should walk into it himself, this time, open-eyed, and in broad daylight, and then it would be utterly impossible for him to draw back. He was no longer a boy, and would probably be no longer accessible to boyish measures. Four years had aged Jack considerably, and the secret and tragic story of his first love had left its traces most markedly upon him. He looked graver and quieter than of old, there was a certain melancholy in

his manner, and the flashes of merriment in his brown eyes were rarer and less spontaneous.

Although Agnes had not been able in her brief interview with him to notice all this, she had observed that he was very much better-looking than he used to be — he was broader and more manly in figure, and the Southern climate, which had suited his health, had browned and perfected his features. The future Lord Castlemere was now a very handsome man, and Agnes was not at all insensible to the fact.

She was surprised to find herself attracted by Jack in a way which he had never attracted her in the old days. Perhaps it was the knowledge that it would be hard work to win him back, and the consciousness that she would have to teach him to love her before he would be hers, that added zest to her feelings towards him—or perhaps it was only, after all, the title and the Castlemere diamonds, and the conviction that this perhaps was the last good opportunity of making a brilliant marriage she was likely to have.

Be this as it may, there was a sense of elation upon her, as she drove home by herself from Northminster, which reflected itself in the brightness of her eyes and colour.

“What is the matter?” asked her aunt, as she came in.
“Something has happened!”

“Yes, something has happened. I have met Lady Mary and Mr. Ludlow.”

“And of course you have asked him to come here?”

“Of course I have done nothing of the sort. But he will come all the same.”

“What makes you think so?”

“Because I did not give him the smallest encouragement to do so,” answered Agnes with a laugh. “Don’t look so bewildered, aunt! I know very well what I am about!”

“I am sure I hope you do, my dear. But pray remember that if you mean to marry Mr. Ludlow you will have to go to work very carefully. If one word were to reach Lady Mary’s ears or his, of your goings on with poor Hugh Lawley for the last two years, I wouldn’t give a fig for your chances of becoming Lady Castlemere!”

“And who is to tell them, pray?” cried Agnes angrily. She had flung herself down upon a low couch, and a dark-red flush of annoyance dyed her brow. “They have been abroad, they have heard no London gossip—the only people here who could do me any harm are the Stoneleys, and they are in Scotland. Besides, I have done with the whole business,” she added, almost fiercely, “it is over and forgotten. Why do you mention the wretched man’s name to me? Pray never speak of him again.”

She rose impatiently, and walked to the windows and back.

Mrs. George only shrugged her shoulders.

"I feel rather sorry for poor young Ludlow!" she said presently.

"Keep your pity for him until he asks you for it," said her niece, stopping short before her in her walk. Then with a sudden change in her voice she exclaimed earnestly: "Oh! why will you never credit me with a single good feeling, Aunt George?"

Aunt George might have replied because she knew her to be incapable of one, but as she was a peace-loving woman on the whole, she prudently held her tongue.

"If I can only bring this thing about, and marry and settle down, I shall turn over a new leaf altogether. I shall make Jack a good wife, and be a good daughter-in-law to Lady Mary, and I shall stop in the country and do my duty and visit the poor, and organize charity bazaars—and—"

But here Mrs. George arrested her by bursting into a peal of loud and contemptuous laughter.

"Why don't you say, at once, that you will read your Bible and say your prayers twice a day as well, my dear! No, no, Agnes, you can tell all that to Lady Mary when you are engaged to her son, and perhaps she may believe you, but you really cannot expect *me* to swallow all that rodoman-tade!"

The door closed behind her aunt and her mocking laughter.

Agnes stood quite still for a minute or two in the middle of the room.

"How I hate Aunt George," she said presently, in a low hard voice, "how I hate her! and the worst of it is I daren't tell her so, for I dare not make an enemy of her. But when I am Lady Castlemere I shall certainly cut my Aunt George. I really did mean it, too. I really should like to lead a good life, and live down the past; but that is the way one's best moments are misunderstood! Why did she taunt me with Lawley's name? Oh, God! can a woman *never* shake her name free from scandal in this world?"

Never, Agnes Verinder, never! for never yet has there been found the water that will wash the stains from a smirched reputation, or the memory that will grow quite oblivious of a woman's stormy past!

Meanwhile, Jack Ludlow, for his part, had driven his mother home from Northminster in a dreamy and meditative silence which Lady Mary took care not to break in upon.

The sight of Agnes Verinder had undoubtedly affected him powerfully. Her physical beauty had always exercised a strong fascination for him, her splendid figure with its Juno-like proportions, together with the languid grace of her attitudes, and the half-smothered fires of her magnificent

eyes, appealed to senses in a curiously distinct manner. No other woman had ever roused in him that peculiar kind of excitement that she did. His lost Madge, whom he had loved with his whole heart, had appealed almost entirely to that higher and holier portion of a man's nature, which some women instinctively call forth in the men with whom they have to do. His *soul* as well as his heart had loved her, and to this hour, all the tenderness and chivalry that was in him encircled her memory in reverence, as a precious relic is enshrined in a jewel-studded casket of purest gold. In losing her, Jack sometimes felt with a wild and unutterable regret that he had lost his hold upon all that was good in this world, as well as all that was worth striving after in the next.

Far other were the fires that Agnes' splendid physique awoke in him. These were of the earth, earthy ; and no faintest ray of a heaven born purity shone across the fiercer glow of their lurid light.

Nevertheless, as a complete contrast to the woman he had loved before, Agnes was perhaps even more fatally dangerous to him than any other who might more nearly have resembled the sweet and candid girl wife whom he had lost.

When he looked back to that never-to-be-forgotten evening when she had lured him by her artifices to fall away from his faith and his truth towards Madge, he shuddered indeed at the recollection, but more at his own baseness than at the frankness of her preference, in which, of course, there lay an element that was by no means unflattering to his vanity. Time, too, had softened down many of the salient points of her conduct, which, at the time, had shocked and distressed him.

He remembered also that he had treated her badly, and that she would only have been in her right if she had turned her back upon him to-day. If he had not actually wounded her heart, he had, at any rate, trampled upon her pride, and her gentle and modest reception of him, touched him very deeply.

She had never married ! That fact alone seemed to unfold a whole volume of her private history to him ! Perhaps, during these years, when he had half forgotten her very existence, she had all the time been suffering silently and bitterly for the sake of one who had ruthlessly destroyed her happiness. Perhaps she loved him ! The idea was not without its charm to him.

He was free now. Free to offer his hand and what was left of his heart to anyone he pleased ; he might not indeed be able to give her his better self, or his deeper love, but he could give her his genuine admiration, and he could offer to her at least one thing—reparation for the past.

Before he reached Castle Regis he had made up his mind that he would ride over to lunch at Deep Deane, the following morning.

Lady Mary said no word to him about Agnes—experience had made her wary; but, in the safe seclusion of Castlemere's study, she revealed to him the details of the meeting between the young people in Jake's shop.

“I believe it will all come on again.”

“I am more than glad; it will be of the greatest comfort to me, if it is so. I shall tell Jack.”

“You will tell him nothing, Castlemere! Believe me, Jack is not a man to be driven. Let us leave it to chance—fate has thrown them together again, and fate will do the rest.”

And when Jack announced at breakfast the next day that he intended to ride over to call on Sir Herbert and should not be back to lunch, Lady Mary had self-control enough to refrain from even a glance of covert triumph in the direction of her brother-in-law.

CHAPTER XXVI.

NEWS FOR LANCE.

“Friendship is constant in all other things
Save in the office and affairs of love:
Therefore all hearts in love use their own tongues.”

—SHAKESPEARE.

A FORTNIGHT later, Lance Parker was on his way to Castle Regis. For many days after his visit to Fairmead, he had been so depressed and so thoroughly unnerved by what he had discovered there, that he had not been able to rouse himself sufficiently to take up the threads of his broken life again.

He stayed in town, and sat all day in his club, reading or pretending to read. More often he was only dreaming of the past, and of that fair young life, which Death, as he believed, had taken so early, and hidden for ever out of sight beneath the churchyard's sods.

There was a mystery about it, too, which all the thinking about it in the world seemed unable to unravel to him. Why, if she had loved Jack, and Jack had loved her, had nothing come of that love? Why had he left her? Was it possible that he had been blind and insensible to that sweet gift of her heart, for which he himself would have given his life? He supposed it must have been so. He even fancied that Jack must have trifled with her—meaning nothing—and then, having gone his way, had forgotten her. Then, had she suffered? had she sorrowed much? And what again was this other trouble which she had written to him about, and

by reason of which she had prayed him to meet her in London, and to help her?

He had not done so, and, seemingly, she had gone home —to die!

Often he read over the little note she had written to him—trying to decipher her meaning, and to gain some insight into what her sorrow might have been; but always the brief lines baffled and bewildered him anew, and, with a sorrowful shake of the head, he would return the crumpled paper to his pocket book, folding it up, and putting it away with reverend fingers as a sacred thing, which a dear dead hand had touched.

In course of time it came to Jack's ears that Lance had returned from his wanderings, and had been seen in town. Thereupon came an indignant and reproachful letter, rallying him upon having forgotten his old friends, and urging him, peremptorily, to come at once to Castle Regis and to take up his quarters there for an indefinitely long visit. Lady Mary added her entreaties in a little postscript at the end of the letter, and Lance, shaking off the clouds of gloom that oppressed him, accepted the invitation, fixed an early day, and started north.

All the way in the train his thoughts were deeply occupied by that summer which Jack and he had spent upon the *Naiad* below Fairley Lock. It was perhaps natural in any case that he should have dwelt upon it, seeing that since that period of intimacy and genuine companionship, he had been parted so entirely from the man who for many years had been his greatest friend. There had been no division between them, no disagreement, save one so vague and so intangible that it had never been put into words on either side. It was Life that had parted them—Life that divides us so often from our dearest, that takes two people who have been much to each other, and sends one to one side of the world, and one to the other; as straws that are tossed together upon a stream become widely severed by the current, and never come together again. Thus it is that the current of Life deals with men and women. For months, for years, it may be, our existence is so intimately bound together that it seems as if nothing save Death itself can have power to part us; then all at once—no one knows why or wherefore—we are sundered! Time and silence roll between us—other voices fill our days, other interests crop up around us. The voice that was once so familiar speaks no more, the life that ran parallel to ours, has diverged and gone on its own way, and we know it no more, save as a tender memory in the store closet of our past.

So it had been with Lance Parker and Jack Ludlow; only that in their case the silence was suddenly broken, the lute

had taken up again the interrupted strain, the wheel of fate had taken half a turn backwards, and they were to meet again !

Would they be changed to one another, or would everything be the same as before ? Would the good old bachelor life begin again—the days of sport together over flood or field, the cosy evenings of smoke and talk, the pleasant chaff, the congenial answering of spirit to spirit upon every subject under the sun ?

These were the questions which Lance asked of himself as the express train bore him rapidly northwards.

And in order to start things fairly between them, he made up his mind that he would speak to Jack on the very first opportunity about Madge. Had he heard that she was dead, he wondered, and if so, had he cared ? Perhaps he did not know it ; perhaps, even, he would be sorry when he heard the news, sorry with that passing sorrow which makes a man sad for an hour, with that sadness which he is able to shake off comfortably as he sits down with a good appetite to discuss his well-cooked dinner !

The train steamed into Northminster Station, and there stood Jack waiting for him on the platform. A stronger, broader, older-looking Jack than of old, with the hue of health on his sun-tanned features and a thoroughly happy light in his clear, brown eyes.

In a moment the two men's hands were locked together in that close grip which is an Englishman's truest expression of friendship.

Their first words too were eminently British and prosaic :

“Here you are, old chap !”

“How are you, old man ?”

“Where are your traps ? Hope you've brought your gun.”

“Trust me ! and my rod too ! Two portmanteaux and a hat box, that's all.”

“There's the cart for the luggage. Leave your bag, James will bring it on. Come on.”

In a few minutes they were swinging out of the Town into the country roads, seated side by side together on a high dog-cart with a fast-trotting bay mare in front of them.

“This is like old times, Jack.”

“Yes, isn't it jolly ? What do you mean you old hermit crab by shutting yourself in London all this time and never letting me know you were home ? However, now I've got you, I don't mean to let you go in a hurry, I can tell you !”

So Jack *was* just the same again after all ! Or—was he ? Lance glanced a little curiously at the upright figure on the driving-box beside him.

He was not quite sure about it yet.

"You will have a lot to tell me, Lance. I want to hear all about your big game, and the bear hunts, and the stalking the wapiti. Lord! What a lucky chap you are, Lance, to have seen and done so much, whilst I have been fiddling about in European capitals and dawdling away life in foreign hotels! You'll have to tell me all you have done, and describe your big days."

"Never fear, we'll have many a good old-fashioned bachelor jaw over our pipes together, old man, and I'll spin you as many yarns as you like—though, for the matter of that, I don't know why you and I shouldn't start off on a little trip of our own next year—eh?"

Then Lance was distinctly conscious that there was a change.

Jack hesitated a moment, and a vague shadow passed across his face.

"There's nothing on earth I should love so well," he answered a little slowly, "if—if I could only see my way to it, but— However, we will talk it all over bye-and-bye."

"Done any boating this summer?" asked Lance presently.

"No. We didn't get home till the end of June, you see, and I had to come home. I couldn't leave the mother, and my uncle is getting old and feeble and expects me to stick at home and look after things for him. I should dearly love to have a pull on Father Thames again," he said it with a sigh, and Lance answered quickly :

"Those were happy days we spent on the *Naïad*, Jack! I shall always look back to that summer as the most delightful time of my life. By-the-way, have you ever heard any news about—"

But the question was never finished, for Jack turned suddenly round to him, and cutting him short as though he had not been listening to him, said with a slight air of embarrassment :

"Lance, old man, I have something to tell you, and I may as well tell it you now as later."

They had reached the foot of a long, steep hill, and Jack reined the mare in to a walk; the groom had jumped off the back seat to walk up the hill, and they were practically alone.

Somehow Lance's heart sank. Such a beginning could only mean one thing. He knew what was coming.

"All right, say on, what is it?" he answered dully, looking straight out before him at the woodland landscape fast yellowing into autumnal hues.

For a moment or two Jack was silent, flicking the mare's sides lightly with the whip—apparently the confession he was about to make caused him some difficulty to put into

words—and it was with most palpable nervousness that he at length burst forth with seeming irrelevance.

"You were talking about a trip abroad together; well you must know, of course, how much I should like such a thing, and to go with you, old man, would be delightful. I can't think of anything jollier, in fact, but a man isn't always his own master, you know."

"Surely your mother, now she is so much stronger, could spare you, and your uncle—"

"Oh, yes, there would be no difficulty about them; I could get away easy enough if that were all, but there is something else, Lance."

"Oh," the interjection was neither an exclamation nor an interrogation. It was merely a commentary remark, not at all calculated to help a nervous man on with his subject.

Jack gave an uneasy side glance at his companion. He wished he would display some interest or curiosity, but Lance was filling his pipe with deliberate tranquillity, and looked profoundly neutral.

"Can't you guess what it is, Lance?" he remarked insinuatingly.

"Oh, yes, I can guess fast enough. You are going to get married, I suppose."

"You've hit it," said Jack.

"I always was remarkable for great mental sagacity," observed Lance. He was deeply engaged in striking a wax match, sheltering the flame between his hands and drawing long breaths at the mouth-piece of his pipe. When the bowl was fairly alight he shut up his light-box with a snap, and added as he returned it to his pocket, "I suppose I ought to congratulate you."

"Don't take the trouble to do so if it is inconvenient," replied Jack with some offence. "Upon my word, old man, you are not particularly enthusiastic over my news."

"My dear Jack, why on earth should I be enthusiastic? You don't expect me to say I am glad, do you? Just as I had come back hoping that our old friendship was to be resumed and we were going to have such good times together."

"So we shall, Lance, so we shall. I can't, of course, go round the world with you under the circumstances, but why on earth shouldn't we have many good days together? I am not going to leave off shooting and hunting and fishing and enjoying myself because I am going to take a wife, I hope, nor am I going to give up the dearest fellow and the best pal I ever had in my life."

"Ah, but Jack," interrupted Lance, a good bit softened by the affectionate tone of the last words, "you know it will be very different. Everything is over and done with when a man marries."

"You talk as if a married man was the same thing as a dead man."

"So he is pretty nearly, as far, of course, as his bachelor friendships and pleasures go."

Then there was another little awkward pause. The groom had jumped up behind, and they were trotting rapidly down the smooth, white road. Away down in the valley the noble castellated frontage of Castle Regis arose above the varied tones of the brown and yellow woods; the trout stream wound like a silver snake amongst the meadows, and the round-topped, barren moors, where grouse and black-game abounded, stretched in swelling purple undulations beyond the confines of the Park.

It was a fair prospect and a fair inheritance for a man to be born to, and it looked unspeakably lovely as it lay stretched like a map beneath them in the tender radiance of the September afternoon.

Lance was struggling manfully with his temper. Something far deeper than personal disappointment at losing his bachelor crony, lay at the root of his gruff and unsympathetic reception of Jack's news. He was angry and wounded—and bitterly jealous for her who was dead! Why couldn't Jack have married her and made her happy since he wished to take to himself a wife? Was she not good enough, and fair enough, and well born enough, to have been welcomed as a daughter at yonder stately castle? If he had married her she might have been alive now—alive and happy, waiting there to greet her husband's friend—instead of rotting in her lonely grave! Ah! the pity of it! the pity of it!

"You haven't asked me yet who the lady is!" observed Jack, breaking in upon his turbulent meditations.

"No—no more I have. Who is it?"

"It is Miss Agnes Verinder—she is the only daughter of our neighbour, Sir Herbert Verinder—see over there," pointing with his whip down into the valley, "that is where his place, Deep Deane, lies. You can just see the chimneys of the house above the trees. Agnes is a great favourite of my mother's—in fact she and my uncle have desired the match for a long time. My uncle, not unnaturally, thinks about the property which will eventually be hers, and my mother is persuaded that she will make an excellent wife to her absolutely perfect son! Agnes is a very beautiful girl—you will admire her. Oh—by the way, you have seen her—you must remember her. She was at that horrible picnic we had on the *Naiad* when it poured all day."

And then a sudden memory swept over him as he uttered the words—a memory of that golden evening when after that disastrous picnic was over, and he had walked out and met Madge upon her pony! and there in the radiance of the

dying day had told her that he loved her, and had held her for the first time to his heart. Did life hold such evenings for him now?

Lance suddenly glancing at his friend was puzzled to see a deathly pallor rush like a wave over his bronzed and healthy face—it was gone in a moment, and his natural colour returned—but that evidence of a sudden and unaccountable emotion bewildered him.

“I remember Miss Verinder perfectly,” he answered after a moment. “She is very tall and goddess-like, and she had a very elaborate and beautiful dress on, which she was dreadfully afraid of spoiling, and her lace parasol got soaked into a sort of pink cream with white streaks on it !”

“You have described her perfectly,” answered Jack, with a slight laugh. “That was she—she always dresses well.”

“She is very handsome—you will have a beautiful wife.”

“Thanks, old fellow. Yes, she is good-looking.”

“And when is the event to come off ?”

“In December, I believe. They tell me it takes nearly three months to buy frocks. I shall get a good five weeks’ hunting first.”

They were nearing the park gates now, and suddenly Lance said, in an oddly-earnest voice :

“Jack, old man, I am your oldest friend.”

“Of course you are, Lance—the oldest and the best ! and by the same token you will have to be my best man.”

“Will you answer me one question from your heart, for the sake of our old friendship; and not be angry with me for asking ?”

“Ask away, Lance.”

“Were you in love with Miss Verinder then—on the day of that picnic I mean ?”

Jack turned upon him a startled face, and eyes wide open with indignant refutation.

“In love with her then ?—when we were on the *Naiad* you mean ? Good God, no ! What can have put such an idea into your head ?”

The vehemence of his denial was unmistakable, and was a fresh perplexity to Mr. Parker, who, however, only answered unconcernedly :

“Oh !—only I rather wish you had been—that is all !”

A reply which puzzled Jack almost as much as his previous question had done.

It would have been the solution of much that was incomprehensible to Lance Parker’s mind had the question been differently answered ; for had Jack been attached to Miss Verinder in those days, it would have not been wonderful that he should have remained impervious to the quieter charm of Madge’s less remarkable loveliness—nor would it

be strange that with so strong an attraction as that handsome and well-dressed woman, he should have remained unconscious of another love that might have been his for the asking.

But Jack had just denied with indignation, nay, almost with anger, that he had been in love at that time with the woman who was now to become his wife. And Lance was more in a fog about the past than ever!

In the face of this new complication, he could not speak of Madge and of her death to Jack now. He could not put to him those searching questions that he had prepared, nor rake up that forgotten memory out of the slumbering ashes of the past! Perhaps at some future occasion an opportunity might occur which would enable him to discover the truth—but for the present, to drag her name, and her sad end into the glaring sunlight of Jack's new hopes and brilliant future, was an impossibility to him, it would have been a desecration to her, and a jarring chord to have struck amongst the joy bells of Jack's betrothal. So he was silent as they drove up the wide avenue to the handsome terraced portico, where Lord Castlemere and Lady Mary stood—waiting with the true instinct of hospitality—bareheaded in the sunshine, to welcome their guest to the house.

But in spite of their kindness and the heartiness of their greetings, and in spite of Jack's evident pleasure and delight in his society, and his eagerness to be off on the morrow after the partridges with him, and in spite of that "yarn" about the "big game" which they duly had at night in the cosy smoking room together, over their nocturnal pipes—in spite of all this, Lance realized very sadly as he laid his head upon his pillow that night, that the good old days were over for ever, and that betwixt himself and his early friend there was fixed a gulf which was so wide and so deep that nothing in this world would ever serve to bridge it over or bring them back again to the old conditions of perfect fellowship and sympathy.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE LAST BLOW

"Hark! to the hurried question of despair:

'Where is my child?' an Echo answers 'Where?'"

—BYRON

REGULARLY every morning a quietly-dressed young woman turned the corner of one of those numerous dull and mean little streets which lie between Marylebone Road and Oxford Street, and proceeded in a south-easterly direction towards the noise and confusion of the main thoroughfares. Every morning at the same hour, wet or fine, for nearly a month

that same young woman might have been met at the self-same corner. At the beginning of the time her step had been quick and elastic, there had been an eager hopefulness in her eyes ; and her cheeks, although pale, were still rounded with the soft outlines of youth and health. But as the days wore on, her step became feebler and slower, and dark circles traced by sleepless nights and harrowing anxiety began to creep around her tired and languid eyes—whilst the cheeks fell away into pathetic hollows and the rosy lips became paler and more pinched, as each day of hopeless search succeeded its predecessor.

There was another woman who was accustomed to come by this corner at the same hour every morning of her life, who used to look at the pale girl at first with an idle interest as she passed by her, then by degrees with a livelier sympathy, quickening insensibly as the days went by, into intense and almost painful compassion.

This other woman was well clad and prosperous in appearance. She wore handsome dresses of silk or cloth, and smart little dainty bonnets tied securely under her full round chin, setting off a kind and good-looking face, in which shrewd common sense was curiously blended with soft-hearted womanliness ; a combination that is more rare than it may be imagined. Her age might have been two or three-and-thirty, and her figure was lissome and graceful. When it was fine, this pleasant-looking lady walked, stepping out firmly and freely upon well-shod feet, with well-shaped insteps and slender ankles, and holding her silken skirts carefully up out of the dust and mud of the pavements, and when it was wet she drove in a hansom, and then sometimes she would bid the man drive a little slower past the end of Boston Street until she could catch a glimpse of that slender sad figure coming out of one of the poor doorways of the mean little row of lodging houses.

Mrs. Waterson used to watch quite anxiously at last for the girl ; once or twice she saw her again in the evening on her way home, but not often, and sometimes she missed her altogether for a day, and then she felt quite uneasy and uncomfortable about her.

“ I wonder who she can be, and where she goes to every day,” Mrs. Waterson used to think to herself, even in the midst of her busy life, which gave her but little time to think about anything save her own affairs. “ I suppose she goes to work somewhere—but she must be badly paid, for she gets thinner and whiter every day—yet somehow she looks like a lady—I am certain she cannot have been born to work.”

Mrs. Waterson herself had not been born to work. Her father had been a Queen’s Counsel, and her mother the daughter of a physician in good practice. But her parents

were both dead, and she had imprudently married a good-looking young barrister, who had neither the wits nor the chances for getting on in his profession. He was briefless when she married him, and he continued briefless until the day of his death. All he had ever been able to do had been to squander his wife's little fortune, and to make away in some mysterious fashion with every penny he could lay his hands upon. When he died, and left her with three small children on her hands, Constance Waterson found herself so poor, and so at a loss as to how she was to clothe and feed herself and her little ones, that she set about to consider what she could do to earn a living for them and for herself.

A less self-reliant woman would have fallen back upon the worn-out resource of going out as a governess, or would have sought a place as a companion to an old lady. Mrs. Waterson would not have been content with this. She thought she knew how to do better for herself. She still possessed a small capital, a few hundred pounds, which she could spend as she pleased. It was her all, and failure would mean beggary, but she did not intend to fail. She laid out her slender capital carefully, and with judicious prudence, and she started business as a fashionable dress-maker.

The few relations she had in the world held up their hands in dismay and were highly scandalized. They wrote terrible letters to her, telling her that she was disgracing her family, and dragging her husband's honour into the mud ; that she was lowering herself from the station of life in which God had placed her, and that her name would have to be struck off from their visiting lists.

Constance only smiled to herself at their angry indignation, put their letters into the fire and went her own way. They none of them offered to help her or her penniless children, and she knew that she had nothing to expect from anybody but herself.

Her little venture was crowned with success. She had always been fond of pretty dresses, and in her palmy days had been reckoned as a woman of great taste amongst her acquaintances. What she knew already stood her in good stead, and what she did not know, she picked up quickly and readily.

For the first year it was anxious and uphill work enough, and she was often ready to despair—she had to borrow money, and her expenses were often greater than her profits. But hard work and perseverance, and an exceedingly determined spirit, brought their own reward at last ; and the day came when, having overcome her early difficulties, she found herself in clear waters at last.

The business thrrove and increased. Her good repute gained ground—smart carriages crowded about her door—and the money came pouring in in a continuous stream.

Mrs. Waterson took a nice house in the neighbourhood of the Regent's Park for her children, engaged a good governess and servants to look after them, and flushed with success and with the return of comfort and competence to her home, flung herself more thoroughly into her work than ever. Wet or fine, she was always at her place of business by ten o'clock in the morning, and she seldom left it until after six in the evening. She was just and fair in all her dealings, never overcharged her customers, and always paid her workwomen well, therefore she was as popular and as respected as she was successful.

Now beneath all the shrewdness and worldly-wisdom which habits of business engendered in her, Constance Waterson still possessed a heart of the most sympathetic tenderness. She could never forget the days of her hand-to-hand struggle with poverty, when starvation, gaunt and terrible, had stared with bloodshot eyes into the poor room where her pale little children had wasted away for lack of sufficient food and firing.

When she grew rich, she would often go out of her way to do a good turn to someone who was poorer and more miserable than herself, and no beggar ever pleaded in vain at her doorstep.

It was scarcely wonderful therefore that she found herself taking a deeper interest every week in the girl who attracted her daily attention in the street.

She did not, however, see her way to helping her. The girl did not beg—she seemed to be a lady, her face was refined and proud, and her clothes were well made and of good material. Constance knew by experience that a lady who is poor, is terribly sensitive, and she feared to wound her feelings by addressing her without any excuse for doing so. And yet she longed to know more about her. She felt convinced that she was in trouble, and she guessed that the time would soon come when she would stand in sore need of help.

Meanwhile Madge, all unconscious of the kind eyes that watched her so compassionately, continued her daily walks amongst the crowded streets in search of work or occupation of some kind.

How hopeless a task it was, only became revealed to her by degrees as the time wore away, and hope after hope fell, dashed to the ground.

Every morning at first, leaving her boy under the care of the draggled landlady of the little lodging house, she started forth full of eager energy, in the certainty that something, she knew not what, would come to her before the day was over.

She haunted registry offices and governess' institutions,

she answered in person numberless advertisements she found in the papers for "young ladies of genteel appearance" who were wanted by manifold persons, for many and various purposes. But always it was in vain. Either she was too late and the place was gone, or else they wanted personal references and a character from her last situation—whilst the very mention of the child, from whom she could not be parted, seemed to be sufficient to secure her being turned out of doors with ignominy and derision.

In spite of her utmost care, her little store of money was rapidly dwindling. She only rented one small room, a dreary back bedroom, looking out into a desolate and soot-begrimed yard—here, little Johnnie had to be left from morning to night, whilst his mother, as she had now taught him to call her, was out. Mrs. O'Grady did her best to "keep an eye" as she called it, upon him, but Mrs. O'Grady though warm-hearted, was a slatternly Irishwoman, and had enough to do to mind her own brood of six dirty and noisy children, besides looking after her lodgers. Still by a special arrangement, Johnny had his dinner with her children, and was admitted on a familiar footing to games in the dirty back yard. For these doubtful privileges Madge had to pay a little extra daily. Moreover, Johnny was still weakly from his recent illness, and soon began to miss the fresh country air, and plentiful food he had been accustomed to. He lost his appetite and began to fail, so that Madge had to get cod liver oil from the chemist, and fresh milk from the dairyman, to strengthen and feed him up. All this made holes in her little capital.

She began to feel very hopeless and out of heart.

When she had recovered the shock of not finding Lance Parker at the Paddington Station on her arrival in London, she had realized quickly that she must depend solely upon herself and her own exertions. She had guessed at once that her letter must have failed to reach him, and that in all probability he would never receive it.

To go back to Fairmead was clearly impossible ; she knew that her aunt would only tear her child from her, and that nothing but increased severity, in consequence of her attempt to escape, would be dealt to her with regard to him.

In her utter inexperience of the cruel world upon whose cold mercies she was flinging herself, it seemed to her that it would be very easy to remain in London and to earn her living there. She was fairly well educated in a sound old-fashioned way, and she was musical enough to teach little girls to play on the piano. In her ignorance she believed that it would be a simple thing to obtain occupation as a daily governess—she little knew how overstocked is that outlet for female energy, and how much larger the supply of governesses is than the demand for them.

After a few days she became less ambitious ; work of any sort she would be thankful to take, her old world training had made her clever with her needle, she could sew and stitch, and her deft fingers knew how to fashion delicate laces and ribbons into caps for old ladies and bonnets for young ones. Fired with a new hope she left the registry offices and turned to the shops—only to meet with greater rebuffs.

The well-dressed young ladies in the fashionable West End establishments, looked coldly at her and the head people turned her out.

“We don’t want no beggars here,” said one hard-faced woman to her as she pointed imperiously to the door.

“I am not a beggar—I am anxious for work. I will work for you, for so little, so very little, if you will only try me and give me something to do.”

“Work, indeed ! and where’s your references, and who have you been ’prenticed to, to learn the business, I should like to know ? Come be off with you, or I’ll give you in charge !”

This was only a sample of the reception she generally met with.

Day by day she lost hope—and inch by inch she saw the ghostly apparition of the famine spectre drawing closer and closer to her and to the child. If only she had been alone she felt she could have borne it better—for of what good was life to her—would it not be very easy to die !

She had lost all—love, faith, and hope ! Family affection had gone down for ever into Aunt Margaret’s grave, and she had voluntarily turned her back upon the material advantages of her existence. What had she left to live for ?

But there was the child ! For him, and for his privations her heart ached with a horrible anguish. She saw him failing day by day—his tiny face grew pale and wan—his eyes shone with the preternatural gleam of want — his chubby limbs became limp and attenuated. A wild rage of despair possessed her. What could she do to save him—how was she to put bread into his mouth ?

Evening after evening she sat with him in her lap, in the darkness of the squalid room—for she could not afford candles—hugging him to her heart, and soothing his moans with crooning murmurs of love and tenderness—giving him kisses when she fain would have given him food ; till a sort of rebellion, against life, and against God Himself, arose wildly and madly in her heart.

What had she done to be so hardly treated ! Was not her punishment out of all proportion to her sin ?—nay, it had not even been sin, only a mistake—that was all ! A mistake to have given herself to a man she scarcely knew, without the consent of her relations, and in defiance of the teaching that

had been instilled into her. Oh ! God was unjust indeed to visit her so harshly for this !

It was the old Puritan creed of sin and its equivalent—of the equal balance dealt out in proportion to our deserts : the miserly creed that has wrecked the faith of thousands, and hardened scores of hearts into the bitterness of inextinguishable resentment !

Alas ! why will not men and women shake off the burden of this horrible and vain delusion ! For it cannot be—there can be no such thing. No debit and credit account is kept on High wherewith to torment poor suffering man, else were the injustice of Life even more flagrant than its cruelty. Sin may, and doubtless does, bring its earthly consequences, but retribution is devilish and not Divine—and sorrow and suffering are sad laws which have surely nothing to do with individual shortcomings. Death and disease have their appointed work to do in every generation, and the Tower of Siloam falls upon the innocent as often as upon the guilty.

But to poor Madge, in this the darkest hour of her life, it only seemed that although she had been faulty, or perhaps even a little selfish and rebellious ; for these trivial sins the Great God of the Universe was working out a cruel and awful Revenge upon her ! She had nothing in her early training to fall back upon—innocent things had always been held up to her as sins, and the narrow bigotry of a hard and loveless old woman had done its best to poison all the sweet springs of her existence.

Yet out of the mists of her storm-tossed misery there came a glimmer of light, to which she turned in her despair.

The child had done no wrong !—it could not be possible that the Lord of all the Earth would wreak his wrath upon his sinless head ! So in the agony of those night watches when sleepless and half-starved she soothed his poor little wasted limbs upon her breast—the poor girl prayed as she had never prayed before.

“God let me bear the punishment—but spare him. Kill me if Thou willest, but save my child.”

And her prayer was answered—yet not perhaps in the manner which she desired.

One evening on her return from a long and, as usual, an utterly fruitless search for work, Madge came wearily and slowly up the miserable little street that was all she could now call home. She was very tired—she had eaten nothing since the morning, her aching feet lagged wearily one after the other, and the face that was once so bright with smiles now wore that settled look of patient hopelessness which is so often to be seen on the faces of the women of the people.

As she neared her own door she saw that Mrs. O’Grady was standing outside in the street waiting for her, and pre-

sently she came forward to meet her with a face of some disturbance.

"Law, mu'm, haven't you got the boy with you?"

"The boy!" Her heart froze into stone. "What do you mean—where is he?"

"I made sure you must have taken him, mu'm. Saints presarve us—what can have become of the little angel?"

A horrible faintness overcame her—she clutched wildly at the woman's arm.

"Speak—speak!" she gasped.

"I've not clapped eyes on him since the morning—he never came into dinner. I thought you must have taken him. Holy Mother! don't look so, mu'm—he's only run out to play by himself—he'll not be far away—the little 'uns often get playing together."

But Madge was out of hearing—pushing her wildly aside she rushed into the house, up the narrow stairs into her own room, calling loudly upon her child.

But in vain she looked into every hole and corner for him—the room was empty—from attic to cellar she sought for him, but Johnny was nowhere to be found.

Half distracted she tore out into the street again. Mrs. O'Grady, whose grimy brats were often missing for an hour or two, when they got playing together with other children in the narrow alleys at the back of Boston Street, tried to console her, and pressed her at least to wait and have a cup of tea and a morsel of food. But she only shook her off speechlessly and rushed forth into the streets. It was getting dark, one by one the street lamps were gleaming forth out of the thin veil of mist which enveloped the Autumn evening. She ran quickly along the street—a policeman stood at his beat at the corner—he recommended her to enquire at the Police Station. As she went she stopped and interrogated every man, woman, and child that she met. Some workpeople for the most part coming home from their day's labour, knew her by sight, and remembered the fragile brown-eyed boy who played with Mrs. O'Grady's children, but none of them had seen him to-day. She reached the Police Station, and so disordered and wild were her looks, and so incoherent were the hoarse words gasped forth from her parched throat—that at the outset the intelligent official took her for a mad or a drunken woman, and would have shut her up—till the heartrending agony of her appeal induced him at last to give some attention to what she was saying.

Then when at last he did understand, he was inclined to treat the whole matter very lightly.

"Little boy lost? oh, he'll have run home by now. You go back and you'll find him safe enough, ma'am. Bill, have you

seen a little chap about? Blue eyes, curly hair did you say, ma'am?"

"No—brown eyes and dark hair."

"Brown eyes and hair?—they all look much the same—three years old? Dressed in sailor suit? Not seen him, Bill? He'll have got playing with the other children—there's lots of small fry about Boston Street. Don't you worry, ma'am, the little chap is sure to run home—he'll be home by now very likely. 'Ere Bill you go along with the lady, and 'ave a look for the little kid."

The superintendent wrote down the particulars and smiled at her comfortably across his big book. He evidently did not think much of the matter, and the mother's agony seemed rather to amuse him than otherwise.

A burly policeman accompanied her out into the street. He had no comfort to give her save that people don't steal children that are poorly dressed. "Most people 'as too many of their own to want stray ones," added Bill consolingly.

"But he may have got run over or be lost and never find his way back," cried Madge brokenly. "He is a country child, he would lose himself directly."

"Not likely, ma'am—we are certain to 'ear of 'im. You'll find 'im safe at 'ome by now, most likely," he added cheerfully, repeating the formula of his superior.

But when they got back to Boston Street, Johnnie had not returned, and nobody could throw any light upon his disappearance.

For the whole of that night and the whole of the next day Madge sought for him far and near. She went to every Police Station for miles round—she wandered from the great crowded thoroughfares into the parks, and from the parks into the squares and terraces—she spent her last few shillings in having posters printed and pasted on to every lamp-post and every street corner within hail—but all was in vain.

The police got tired of looking about for a little brown-eyed boy, who was nowhere to be found, and became interested in some fresh and more interesting case. The few neighbours who had gone out with her at first, volunteering their services to help her, could not afford to give any more time from their work, and by the evening she was left alone wandering still—but wandering aimlessly, and almost blindly about the streets.

For twenty-four hours a crust of bread and a mouthful of water was all that had passed her lips—her money was nearly all gone, she had spent shillings recklessly in cabs and in paying messengers to go hither and thither, and now only a few coppers were left in her pocket.

Her head began to burn oddly, and the houses of the street seemed to be dancing a strange whirligig before her eyes—her tongue was parched and dry—her knees shook and

knocked against each other—sometimes she put her hands out to clutch at the area railings to prevent herself from falling—and once, as the dusk drew on and the lamps shone out again one by one in the dim twilight, she laughed—and the laugh sounded horrible and strange in her own ears !

She stopped to ask herself why she had laughed—but she could not think any longer, and she did not know. Only there came another laugh like an evil echo in the deserted street, and this time it seemed to her as though some mocking devil was standing before her with flame-lit eyes barring her way, and jeering at her despair. And then she uttered a piercing scream. A cold darkness seemed to swallow her up—whilst jets of angry fire shot up about her through the dense blackness. She fell forwards face downwards across the pavement, and remembered nothing more.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A HALF CONFIDENCE.

Speak to me as to thy thinkings,
As thou doest ruminate, and give thy worst of thoughts
The worst of words.

—SHAKESPEARE.

‘I DON’T like your friend, Jack.’

“Not like old Lance? Why he is the best fellow in the world!”

“So he may be from a man’s point of view, but speaking as a woman I consider him eminently disagreeable.”

The lovers were seated together on a couch in the drawing-room at Castle Regis. It was after dinner, and the gentlemen had just come into the room.

Lord Castlemere and Sir Herbert, on the hearthrug, were discussing the new County Councillors ; Lady Mary and Mrs. George Verinder at the centre table, paper and pencil in hand, were jotting down the items of the trousseau which was shortly to be ordered in London ; whilst Lance was happily engaged in relating some of his American shooting experiences to a strong-minded and slightly elderly cousin of Lord Castlemere’s, a certain Miss Horatia Ludlow, who by reason of her cousinship was accustomed to pay an annual visit at this season of the year to her distinguished relative.

Jack and Agnes were seated a little way off from the rest at the further side of the spacious square room. It seemed to be the right thing to do—to isolate himself thus with his lady love when she came to dine at his uncle’s house—and Jack submitted with a good grace to the exigencies of the situation. He was very anxious to do the right thing with regard to Agnes. Whether or no it afforded him much pleasure to do so was another matter.

He had taken his *fiancée* into dinner, and the conversation

between them had been laboured and constrained. He began to find out that he had not very much in common with the beautiful woman who was to be his wife. She did not care for the things he was interested in, whilst he did not enter in the very least into those that interested her. When he came in from the dining-room and saw her seated alone upon a distant sofa, he conceived it to be his duty to go and sit down beside her. He went because it was evidently what was expected of him, not in the least because the mesmerism of love attracted him to her side. In point of fact—although a dozen times a day he endeavoured to persuade himself of the contrary—at the bottom of his heart he was aware that he was not in love with her.

When—without wasting many days after he had first met her again—he had asked her to be his wife, there had been a certain flush upon him of generous exaltation. He had felt himself to be guilty with respect to her—he had treated her badly, and he was very anxious to give her the reparation he owed her. That was the way he had put it to himself.

Then, too, she had been very clever with him. She had played her cards well. She had been modest and retiring in his presence, she had never put forward a finger to beckon him back to her, and yet she had somehow allowed him to understand that she had always loved him, and had remained single for his sake.

So for the second time she had entrapped him. His own generous impulses had carried him towards her, and her skilful handling had done the rest.

But when the deed was done and he had had time to calm down again, Jack awoke to the fact that he was no happier than he was before, that his senses were perhaps enslaved but not his heart, and that the woman to whom he now stood irrevocably plighted was utterly unsuited to him.

It was of no use certainly to dwell upon it. This time there would be no possibility of a retreat, he could not jilt her for the second time. He would have to abide by the consequences of what he had done.

Outwardly he paid her the most scrupulous and affectionate attention. She had no reason to complain of him. He was a model lover.

He consulted her wishes, forestalled her smallest fancies, and treated her with the utmost deference and consideration ; at the same time, when he was alone with her he found that he had very little to say to her.

During dinner she had entertained him with a description of the wedding garments she intended to order when she went up to London next week with Lady Mary. Jack, to whom the subject was profoundly uninteresting, had some difficulty in stifling his yawns. And yet—he had taken the keenest

notice of a certain simple white cotton dress trimmed with white ribbons that had been by his side four years ago in a far-away country church! The memory of that frock had come back to him once during dinner this evening, with a horrible rush of pain and hopelessness, and he had had to thrust it away from him with a violence which, for a moment, had driven the blood from his heart, and left him cold and sick.

When he took his place by Agnes after dinner he racked his brains for a congenial subject of conversation, so that he was startled into something like excitement by her opening remark concerning Lance Parker.

"I am sorry you don't hit it off with old Lance, Agnes. What has he done to offend you?"

"He has done nothing—it is what he does not do that I object to. He does not seem to think it worth while to cultivate my society. He never speaks to me—he never even looks at me!" she added angrily—for to be insensible to her beauty was a crime which she never forgave in a man.

Jack laughed. "Poor Lance! he certainly is not a lady's man—he never was. But see, he is making up for lost time, he is quite animated by old Horatia Ludlow."

"Surely he can't admire that old maid!"

"No, I don't suppose he admires her—but I daresay he likes her. Horatia goes well to hounds, and is fond of sport of all kinds. I wouldn't mind wagering that Lance is spinning one of his big game yarns into her delighted ears."

"He is very ugly," remarked Agnes with some disgust, after a pause during which her eyes rested with disfavour upon Mr. Parker's podgy form, and round red face. "No woman could ever be attracted by him, unless she were old and faded like Miss Ludlow—but then to be sure I don't suppose he has ever been in love in his life."

The remark made Jack meditative—and for the second time that evening, a flood of memories came back to him with such overwhelming strength—that when he did break the somewhat lengthened silence that followed, he said something which he had always intended to say at some time or other to his betrothed, but which, but for the thoughts called up by her chance remark, he would certainly not have spoken about to-night.

"Agnes," he said very seriously, "there is something I want to tell you—about my past."

Agnes had been lying listlessly back against the satin cushions, fingering the soft feathers of her fan, her eyes fixed with lazy admiration upon the glitter of the diamonds upon her white hands.

Now she sat bolt upright and looked at him eagerly.

"I have a confession to make to you," began Jack.

"It is about the 'Creature'!" thought Agnes with suppressed

excitement. "I was sure he would tell me about her some day! but what a fool he is, poor Jack! not to hold his tongue!"

She only nodded and looked at him with interest and expectation in her large eyes.

"You are a woman of the world, my dear," began Jack somewhat nervously—for now he was launched upon it, it was astonishing how reluctant he felt to disclose even a part of that secret of his past, and how difficult he found it to select the right words in which to do so—"You must, I know, have guessed at the causes which made me treat you so badly in the old days—You must have guessed that I was tied to someone else—in fact, I told you so I think in the letter I wrote you."

"Did you indeed?" thought Agnes to herself—beginning to put the pieces of the broken puzzle together in her mind. Aloud she said:

"My dear Jack, do not apologize. Of course, as you say—I am a woman of the world! and I know that every man has a little history of this nature in the background of his life. I suppose there are very few men, if any, who settle down and marry without having gone through some kind of experience with persons of that kind—and I do not think a wife should enquire too minutely into her husband's past, so long of course, as the whole business is broken off before marriage."

Now the whole of this speech horrified and disgusted Jack to the last degree. Having been all his life singularly free from the degrading influences to which she so glibly alluded—he could not quite believe his ears that a refined and well brought up young lady should be acquainted with, far less speak upon, a subject which is usually tabooed in the presence of ladies—even when they are married.

A hot flush of shame and repulsion mounted to his brow—he looked at her fixedly and with an expression which, although she was far from divining his uncomplimentary thoughts, she realized to be one of distinct disapproval, and which filled her consequently with a vague disquiet.

What Jack was thinking was, that after all she was a vulgar, coarse-minded woman, in spite of her beauty and good birth—that she was devoid of true feminine instincts, and yet, that—Heaven help him—she was the woman whom he was obliged to make his wife!

His whole being recoiled from her—a horrible dismay at what he discovered in her swept over him! and then he recollects that once—if not twice—in his former intercourse with her, a sure but intangible instinct had warned him, that Agnes Verinder was not a pure-natured woman.

No—not for ten thousand worlds would he soil the holy memory of his lost Madge by laying bare her story to such a woman!

Something he must tell her no doubt—but that sweet secret of his ten days' wife should never now be hers to scoff at—or to blacken with her vile and unhallowed suggestions.

"You mistake me entirely," he said at length coldly and hardly. "What I was about to tell you, has nothing to do with the things to which you allude. I have loved another woman devotedly and intensely it is true; but there was no degradation in that love. She was a lady."

"Indeed?" and Agnes elevated her eyebrows into an unbelieving curve—"a real, well-born lady? dear me, how interesting!"

And to herself she said. "As if I hadn't got his letter offering her an allowance locked up in my dressing case at home!"

"As well-born as yourself," answered Jack moodily, looking down upon the carpet.

"And upon what terms pray, were you, with this well-born lady, at the time you made love to me in the garden of this very house?"

With perfect truth Jack replied "I was engaged to be married to her," had she worded the question differently he might have experienced greater embarrassment in answering it.

Agnes, to do her justice, did not believe it. That letter which she knew almost by heart seemed to her to point to something very different. She was angry with him for attempting to hoodwink her.

"He had far better have been honest with me," she thought: "I could have been generous to him. Now, I cannot forgive him because he is deceiving me."

"All this business Jack, is at an end now? I have a right to ask."

"You have every right. It is completely at an end."

"I must of course exact your promise never to see this—this person again? and never to write to her?"

A dark shadow swept over his face—watching him closely, she was surprised to see that for a brief instant his features were shaken with some deep emotion—for a moment he seemed unable to speak. Then at length, in a low broken voice, he replied: "You need have no apprehensions. I can never see her again—never. She is dead."

Then suddenly he rose and left her side and went away to the further side of the room.

Agnes remained where he had left her for some moments buried in thought. His final words had surprised her—they had even disappointed her—for if they were true, they baulked her of her revenge. Of what use to her would be that letter she had treasured so long, if the woman to whom it had been addressed were dead?

But was she dead? that was what Agnes doubted. That was what it remained for her to find out.

After a while she rose slowly and walked towards the rest of the party. Jack had seated himself by Miss Horatia and was listening half interestedly to Lance's vivid description of a bear hunt. Agnes came and stood at the back of her aunt's chair.

"We were just wanting you, dearest child," said Lady Mary's gentle caressing voice as she slipped her hand into that of her future daughter.

"Your aunt thinks we ought to go to Mrs. Waterson's for your walking dresses—she tells me she is considered newer now than old Madame Dentelle—"

"I feel inclined to go to her for everything, Lady Mary!" cried Agnes, throwing herself at once with ardour into a subject which was dear to her. "She has the most perfect taste and fit, and she is very moderate in her prices. Latterly I have left every one else for her."

It had been settled that as Mrs. George's mourning for her father was still too deep for her to be in town, Lady Mary and Agnes should go together for a month to London, and tackle the mighty mysteries of the trousseau together, whilst Mrs. George remained to take care of Sir Herbert. This arrangement pleased everybody, and no one more so than Lady Mary. The energetic little woman looked forward with the keenest delight to a campaign amongst satins and laces, for which her long absence from England had renewed a youthful eagerness—and being sincerely fond of Agnes, in whom her implicit faith was still perfectly unshaken, she looked forward with pleasure to having her with her entirely.

Agnes, who felt herself to be a favourite with her, always shone at her best in Lady Mary's presence, and she knew that she would have a much better time of it in London under her care, than with her Aunt George, who was by no means either blind or indulgent to her faults.

It was the hey-day of her success and triumph, and Agnes felt more inclined for the flattery of Lady Mary's affection than for Mrs. George's open and often unpleasantly expressed disapproval.

Altogether the plan was popular with everyone concerned, not excepting Jack and Lance, who promised themselves a good month of slaughter of pheasants and foxes together, whilst the ladies were preparing for the great event after their own manner in town.

Agnes sat down to the table beside her aunt, and threw herself with eagerness into the discussions on frills and fur-below. But not so eagerly but that her eyes and ears remained watchful and alert in the direction of her lover.

The bear hunt was over. Lance was chaffing Jack about some incident of their boyish days.

" You should have seen him, Miss Ludlow," she heard him say. " He hired the most awful screw you ever saw in your life, his head was all on one side, and he had only three legs, and they weren't sound ones, and a little stump of a hairless tail about an inch long, and yet he went like the very mischief! Jack hadn't got any proper breeches or boots. He looked a pitiful object! He had tied string round his legs to keep his trousers down——"

" Do attend, Agnes," here said Mrs. George. " Will you put down three tea-gowns or four? Lady Mary thinks you had better have plenty."

" Oh, yes, aunt!" Then followed a long dissertation on tea-gowns. The next thing Agnes heard from the trio beyond on the ottoman, was Jack's voice saying heartily and earnestly to Miss Ludlow :

" Yes, Horatia, you are quite right, he is the best fellow in the world! he is my oldest and best friend. We've been in and out of every scrape of our lives together, haven't we, old man? there never was such another Damon and Pythias to be found upon earth as our two selves!"

Agnes heard it, and like a flash of lightning a sudden thought rushed into her mind! Lance Parker, this bosom friend of Jack's, would know all about it! If she wanted to find out who, and what, was this woman he had once loved—if she suspected that he was deceiving her and that she was alive still—if she wanted to get a clue as to where she was to be found so as to brandish that letter of the past effectively before her husband's face and thereby hold a perpetual thumbscrew over him, to whom could she better apply than to Lance Parker for the necessary information?

The thought fired her with excitement.

" He looks soft and silly," she thought, glancing at him askance out of the half-closed lids of her almond-shaped eyes—" the sort of man whose head might be very easily turned by a handsome woman. Nobody has ever yet made love to you, friend Lance, I'd stake my existence upon that! Well, you shall have a little taste of the delusive delights of flirtation, and if I am not able to make you lose your ugly toad's head in the course of half an hour to the extent of getting out of you all that I want to know, then my right hand will have lost its cunning!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

LANCE HAS DOUBTS.

" Be sure of it: give me the ocular proof,
No hinge or loop to hang a doubt on."

—SHAKESPEARE.

LANCE PARKER was considerably surprised, some days later, on a day when Miss Verinder was well aware that Jack had

gone with his mother and Miss Ludlow to pay a duty visit to his maternal grandmother, a venerable dame of ninety, who lived about an hour's journey by rail from Northminster, to encounter the familiar pair of bay ponies which that young lady was accustomed to drive, trotting up the avenue to Castle Regis.

Contrary, too, to her accustomed method of ignoring his existence with as few words as possible, Miss Verinder, who was alone in the pony carriage, met him with a charming smile, and reined in her ponies to speak to him.

"What a piece of luck!" she cried gaily. "I drove over, half hoping to find you in, Mr. Parker! My aunt has a headache, and papa is deep in a new edition of some tiresome old Greek author. I really had nobody to speak to, and I thought, perhaps, as everybody has gone off for the day at Castle Regis, that I might find you in the same plight. I was only afraid you might have gone out shooting."

"No, I thought as Jack was away I would have a day off. I was just going out for a walk."

"That is capital! because now you can come for a drive with me instead, which will be much more amusing. Come, jump in!"

"Are you not going up to the house to see Lord Castlemere? He is at home."

"Dear old man! I love him! But he does so bore me! No, I think I will take you for a turn across Northerley Common and over the hills instead."

There was nothing for it, but to obey her and get into the carriage by her side.

She turned the ponies' heads round, and they bowled quickly together down the long avenue.

For some time Agnes exerted herself to the utmost to be agreeable. She pretended—oh, magical secret for the subjugation of man!—to be very much interested in him. She asked him questions about his parents and early life; she affected a deep sympathy for his orphaned condition, and was moved almost to tears by his allusion to his mother's death. Then she talked to him about his tastes—told him how much she admired men who were fond of sport, and enquired banteringly how many lovely ladies' hearts he had broken in the course of his travels.

Lance began to find her a very delightful companion. He had had no idea that she could be so charming; and then whilst she talked, she flung glances at him out of those magnificent, bewildering eyes, which were not without a certain effect upon him. It was new to him to be so talked to and looked at, and insensibly he felt flattered and pleased by her unwonted attention. He had not hitherto liked her very much, believing her to be a splendid and fashionable

lady, totally unworthy of Jack, and he had kept out of her way with a surly indifference to her charms which had ended by piquing and annoying her.

Now, he began to think that he had misjudged her, and that she had more in her than he had supposed. Her glorious beauty beaming for the first time for him, and him alone, made even his sober head go round a little, and he felt, although he was half unconscious of it, the subjugation of his judgment beneath the spell of her strange and dangerous fascination.

Just when she had got him thoroughly under her hand as it were, Agnes cleverly diverted the conversation from himself to Jack.

They talked about Jack's improved health, about her future plans for his happiness, about his devotion to his mother. Agnes quickly gave Lance the impression that she was deeply attached to him, and that she meant to live solely for his happiness.

This, as he was a good man and a loyal friend, naturally pleased him.

Just when their conversation was at this point, Agnes suddenly remarked with a sigh, whilst her eyes wandered dreamily across the autumn landscape :

“There is only one thing that troubles me—shall I be able to make him happy?”

“How could you fail to do so, Miss Verinder?” cried Lance, with quite a creditable display of gallantry. “He would be a poor sort of man, indeed, who would fail to be happy if you tried to make him so !”

“Thanks for your good opinion, Mr. Parker, but you do not quite understand me. With the best will in the world many a loving wife has failed, because she has not been the sole possessor of her husband's heart. Tell me, Mr. Parker, you are his best friend and you ought to know the truth, do you think he has really and truly got over that old affair?”

Lance glanced at her quickly.

“What old affair?” he asked weakly, with a view to gaining time.

“Oh ! you know quite well. His first love, I mean.”

Was it possible that Jack had told her all about Madge ? Lance was surprised. Yet when he came to think of it he supposed a man might easily conceive it to be his duty to make a clean breast of the past history of his heart to the lady he was about to marry. There was nothing, perhaps, very wonderful in it. And so—Jack had loved Madge after all then !

“You must pardon me, Miss Verinder, for being unable to give you any information about Jack's love affairs,” he said presently, cautiously picking his words as he spoke. “You

must know much more on this subject than I do, and, as a matter of fact, friends as we are, Jack has never in his life made any confidences to me of that description."

"Still, you knew all about her?" persisted Agnes, quite undaunted by his answer.

Lance stuck his eye-glass firmly into its place, looked straight ahead with interest at the view and held his peace.

"She was very lovely, was she not?" hazarded Agnes tentatively, below her breath.

"She was loveliness itself!" burst forth Lance incautiously. "It was the radiance of her goodness of heart which lent its beauty to her face," and then he bit his under lip and was sorry he had spoken so impetuously. Agnes shot a sideways glance of triumphant amusement at him from under the shadow of her dark fringed lids.

"Poor thing! it was very sad her dying," she continued regretfully.

Then, of course, Jack knew that she was dead. Lance could not bear to talk about it—he only nodded. There was a little pause; then, in exactly the same tone of voice and as though finishing her previous sentence, Miss Verinder remarked:

"If, indeed, she did die—that is."

Lance positively jumped. "What? What do you mean, Miss Verinder? How can there be any doubt about her death? What made you say that?"

Agnes shrugged her shoulders lightly. "I only said *if*, Mr. Parker! I suppose you are *sure* that she is dead then?"

"I—I was told so," stammered Lance; he could not bring himself to describe to Agnes Verinder how he had gone into Fairley Churchyard and had seen the stonemasons bringing in that terrible grave-stone.

"One is often misled, you know, by what people tell one," remarked Agnes airily.

"For Heaven's sake explain what you mean!" cried Lance, by this time thoroughly startled. "Has Jack told you that there is any reason to doubt her having died?"

"Oh, dear, no, Jack tells me that she is dead; he quite believes it, I suppose, doesn't he?"

"Then is it possible—and yet, how should it be? Is it possible that you yourself have heard something privately about Madge?"

A little gasp of irrepressible relief and joy escaped her lips. Her name was *Madge*, then! That was something to have found out. *Madge*—*what* she wondered!

"I have heard nothing definite, of course," she replied; "at the same time, it is nothing wonderful to lose sight of a person when one is out of England for some years, as you and Jack have been, and Miss Madge—dear me, I never can remember her other name."

"Durham," supplied Lance, tumbling headlong and with a beautiful unsuspiciousness into the trapspread beneath his feet.

"Oh, yes, to be sure ! This Miss Madge Durham appears to have kept up no communication with Jack for some time, has she ?"

"Not that I know of—but, indeed, Miss Verinder, you must not ask me—I know nothing. I did not even know, in fact, that Jack had been attached to her until you told me, and as to her being alive still, I can hardly believe it, and since Jack himself has told you that she is dead—"

"My dear Mr. Parker," interrupted Agnes, "it is Jack's manner, rather than his words, that have made me fancy he is not quite certain of what has become of her. As you may imagine, I, who am about to become his wife, am not at all anxious to revive her memory in his heart—it was only because I fancied you would know the truth about her that I ventured to ask. Pray forgive the curiosity of a loving woman, and let us drop the subject for ever."

"By all means, Miss Verinder," acquiesced Lance, somewhat eagerly, and they talked of other things.

But Lance by no means dropped the subject in his own mind—the conversation that had taken place between them haunted him day and night, and the idea that in some fashion he had been mistaken and that Madge was not really dead, grew upon him more and more. All at once, as he pondered that night upon what Miss Verinder had said during the course of some hours of sleepless tossings on his bed, he recollects with a flash that her younger aunt had been Margaret Durham too ; in one instant the truth became revealed to him as a possibility, it might have been her aunt who had died and by whose grave he had wept.

And yet Jack had told Agnes that Madge Durham was dead.

That was what he could not understand ; for even supposing that he had been deceived, it was scarcely possible that Jack could have made the same blunder as himself.

He felt that at any cost he must speak to Jack upon the subject. Only, as it was a difficult and delicate topic to broach, he resolved to wait until a suitable opportunity of doing so should present itself. For the next two days no such opportunity seemed to occur.

A big battue of the pheasants the next day, a large party of men, and a houseful of dinner guests in the evening, precluded all possibility of private conversation.

The following day Lady Mary and Agnes were to go to London. Lord Castlemere, whose delight at his nephew's engagement led him into all sorts of extravagances on Agnes's behalf, had taken a furnished house for the ladies for a month in Hill Street, and insisted that the brougham and a pair of horses for their use should go with them to Town.

"I cannot have you running yourself off your legs, or knocking about in draughty cabs," he said to his sister-in-law, "I shall have you laid up again. You will take the brougham to Town with you, Mary ; I insist upon it, so let me hear no more about it."

"You are very good to me," answered Lady Mary, gratefully and affectionately, "I do not know how to thank you."

"I have nobody else to be good to, my dear, save you and Jack, and Jack's future wife, and as to thanking me, I want no other reward save to see a son of Jack's in another year's time. I am growing old, Mary, but if I may only live to see an heir to the old place before I die I shall be content."

The ladies, accompanied therefore by a respectable retinue of men and maidens, set forth from Northminster by a mid-day train : Lord Castlemere and Jack saw them off from the station, and Lance went out rabbit shooting by himself to pass away the time.

But in the evening the friends found themselves alone together once more in Jack's little den, and Lance felt his heart thump oddly within him when he realised that the moment had come to speak on the subject that was so much in his mind.

Somewhat abruptly—for Lance was not good at beating about the bush—he plunged boldly, and a little tactlessly, into the unknown waters he was about to trouble.

"Jack!"

"Yes, old man."

"Miss Verinder spoke to me the day before yesterday about poor Madge Durham."

Jack turned round in his chair and regarded him intently and with the utmost astonishment.

"Agnes—spoke to you—about—*Madge Durham?*" he repeated, very slowly, and in accents of utter bewilderment. And then he waited for more, staring at him intently and fixedly.

"Yes—she—she asked me—a question. I—a—imagined you had told her about her." Lance began to feel very uncomfortable, and his words came out lamely and stammeringly ; the way Jack was staring at him upset him.

"I never mentioned that name to her in the whole course of my life," said Jack with decision.

"You don't say so! Then how the dickens did she know all about her? Why, she asked me if I thought you had got over it and so on."

"Wait a bit, Lance. Did Agnes mention the name of—of Madge to you, or did you, by any chance, suggest it to her?"

"Well," after a moment's pause, "now I come to think of it, I believe I *did* say her name."

"Ah! I thought so!" Jack's brow grew black and angry ;

the whole thing was plain to him. Agnes had been pumping Lance, and Lance had unsuspiciously allowed himself to be pumped.

"I'm really awfully sorry, Jack, I hope I did no harm. But, of course, when Miss Verinder questioned me as if she knew all your past history and appeared to be aware of everything—"

"Don't apologise, old chap. There is no harm done," then, after a pause, he added with an effort, "of course she knew a good deal. I told her enough for her to be quite justified in desiring to know more."

His honour to his future wife made it incumbent on him to say this. He could not say what he thought of her, even to Lance, but he felt more acutely than ever that the future outlook of his life was not a brilliant one.

"After all," he thought bitterly to himself, as, clasping his hands above his head he stared moodily into the fire and puffed away at his pipe. "After all, we can each go our own way when once we are married. She only wants the title, I suppose, and my mother and uncle want me to have a son. When that object is accomplished, I shall have pleased everybody, and nothing more will be required of me."

Then Lance spoke again, and this time with a curious ring of earnestness.

"Now we are on the subject I *feel* that I must say something more to you. Jack, you are quite *sure*, I suppose, that poor Madge is dead?"

There was a little silence. The clock ticked upon the mantelshelf, and a coal fell out noisily into the fender.

"Why do you ask me this?" said Jack at last, in a low, smothered voice.

"Because Miss Verinder has put it into my head that there may be a mistake and that you, yourself, are uncertain about it."

"Good Heavens, Lance—what has Miss Verinder got to do with it?" cried Jack impatiently and irritably. "She knows nothing—absolutely nothing. She was only trying to find out—she—" his words died away suddenly. He was tongue-tied about Agnes, he could not give utterance to what he felt about her.

There was another brief silence, then he resumed in a quieter voice, from which he studiously banished all expression of emotion: "I know that she is dead, because her aunt wrote and told me so at the time."

"What, Miss Margaret?"

"No, the old lady." He paused. Had he said no more, who knows how this history might have ended? But it takes but a little thing sometimes to alter the whole course of human events.

Two or three words did it in this case.

"She died the winter we were in Algiers, three and a half years ago," he added, gravely and sadly, after that moment of silence.

It was Lance's turn to be startled and amazed.

He sat up in his chair, and his ruddy face turned positively crimson.

"My dear fellow—nothing of the sort! *Three years*, did you say? Three months, you mean—she died last July."

"Good God! Lance! what do you mean? But you are mistaken, you cannot know, for you were away. I tell you I had a letter from old Miss Durham. I got it at Algiers. I shall never forget the moment I received it—never to my life's end. If you love me, Lance, never speak of that sweet girl—of that sad death again."

His voice broke—he turned very pale—and leaning his elbow on his knee he put up his hand to shelter his face from his friend's eyes.

Lance got up from his place and laid his hand upon his shoulder.

"My dear fellow, I *must* speak. There is some horrible mistake somewhere. Madge was alive in June, for I had a letter from her."

Jack lifted a face of horror—a face as white as death—towards him. His lips parted, but no words came from them.

Lance was fumbling in his leather pocket-book.

"Look at this and judge for yourself," he said, and laid the sad little note of despair and misery he had received from her upon Jack's knee.

Jack stood up and went to the table to look at it by the light of the lamp. As he read it his hands trembled so violently that he could scarcely distinguish the written words. He knew it was from her although he had never received a letter from her, yet her writing seemed familiar to him, even had not the "Madge" at the end placed it beyond all doubt.

"When did you get this?" he asked presently, in a voice that struggled to be calm.

"I found it at my Club when I got home. It was a month old. I was too late to help her. I went down to Fairley the next day. The village, I was told, had been decimated by typhus fever. Numbers had died of it. I went up to the house. The butler told me that she was dead. Afterwards I stood by her grave in the churchyard."

"And yet she went up to London?" said Jack thoughtfully turning the note over and over in his hands.

"Yes, and failing to meet me, she must have lost heart and gone home again—to fall sick and die. At least, that is how I imagine it must have been—unless—unless—"

"Unless *what*, Lance?"

Jack turned round and faced him. Their eyes met. They were both pale, and both terribly in earnest, both were struggling with that strange restraint which had always oppressed them at the mention of this woman's name.

The old rivalry blazed up anew between them. The old jealousy that had slumbered in her grave, awoke once more over the living memory of her whom they believed to be dead.

"Say what you were going to say," said Jack, shortly and almost imperiously. "Unless what?"

"Unless the old woman deceived *me*, as she deceived *you*. Unless it was the aunt who was dead, and not Madge. I confess that the idea seems wildly improbable, and yet it kept me awake all last night. It was Miss Verinder, I believe who put the thought into my head. She seemed to think—"

Jack interrupted him with a gesture of impatience.

"Never mind what Miss Verinder said—she knows nothing. Her words don't count. Lance, it is only your own wild fancy. We have not a shadow of proof. Tell me again what happened when you went to Fairley."

Lance told him the whole story — omitting no single detail of his visit. At the end Jack flung himself down wearily into his chair and covered his face with his hands.

"The butler would not have told you a lie," he said at last. "Why should he? And you say both men were dressed in mourning, and that they offered to take your name to the old aunts? You should have gone in and seen them. They might have told you more. But I cannot doubt that she is dead. There was a motive in the old woman's lie to me, for she must have intercepted my letters and have known that I loved her niece, but what motive could the butler have had in inventing such a thing to you? It was true enough, no doubt."

He refused to listen to Lance's doubts, for it seemed to him that they were entirely founded upon Agnes Verinder's ignorant utterances.

Long after Lance had left him he sat on alone, a prey to the most bitter remorse.

That Madge should have been alive still, so short a time ago, to suffer and to believe him to have deserted her, was a grief so stupendous, that his mind was incapable for the time being of grasping any other thought. All else was swallowed up in the agony which this reflection caused him.

As to Lance Parker, he too began to think the fancy that Madge might still be alive was a mere "midsummer madness" of his own heated imagination. Jack, who knew so much more than he did, believed it to be impossible. No doubt Jack was right. He had learnt a good deal more this evening than he had ever known before about Jack's past relations with Madge, and he thankfully exonerated him in

his mind for much of which he had hitherto believed him to be guilty.

He got himself to bed and slept soundly. Would his slumbers have been so tranquil had he known that secret which Jack guarded from him with such mistaken vigilance?

With the shadow of a doubt still in the background of his mind, could he have rested peacefully, had he known that Madge had been actually Jack's wife?

CHAPTER XXX.

WHAT THE YELLOW KITTEN DID.

“ In faith and hope the world will disagree,
But all mankind's concern is charity.”

—POPE.

LITTLE JOHNNY, tempted out by a fitful gleam of pale London sunshine, had stolen down the rickety wooden stairs out into the street. He was too young to realise either that he was doing any harm or that he was running into any danger by going out by himself. It had been very dull and lonely in the little back bedroom where his mother was accustomed to leave him. He could not find little Tim O'Grady, because his mother had sent him to the fish shop in the next street with twopence tightly clenched in his grimy little fist to buy a bloater. Johnny called out to him when he got down to the street, but Tim's favourite playground, the gutter, was empty that morning, and Johnny found himself alone. Whilst he was standing there, doubtfully looking about him on the doorstep, he caught sight of a little tawny-coloured kitten stealing softly out from the railings of the house next door. She was a very ugly kitten—with a black splash half over one eye and down the side of her nose, which gave her a queer dissipated look as if she had been out all night—as, indeed, she probably had. She was of all kittens, the most hideous and unattractive, yet upon Johnny's sight at that moment she beamed as a very phantom of delight. She recalled to his infant mind the baby kittens at the lodge at Fairmead Hall, with which he had played with poor little Frankie Trimmer, who had died of the fever so soon afterwards. Johnny scarcely remembered Frankie, but the kitten awakened keen and exciting reminiscences in his heart at once. He became immediately persuaded that she was the very identical kitten he had played with on that eventful day.

“ Titty, top titty! ” he cried loudly, clapping his hands joyfully together. The orange-coloured kitten naturally ran away, and Johnny ran after her. Down Boston Street, round the corner of James Buildings into Paradise Row, and finally out into the Edgware Road itself, the chase being kept up

tail erect, and her callow paws skimming lightly over the paving stones, and Johnny stumping along manfully on his thin little legs after her.

It was not such an unequal race as might be supposed, for the kitten was very small and pretty nearly as starved as himself, whilst Johnny, though he had only had a dry piece of bread soaked in water for breakfast, had the spirit of a true sportsman to urge him on, and would never have given in as long as he could stand upright, had fortune only been favourable to him.

But alas ! on entering the Edgware Road the kitten vanished.

Whether she fled out into the crush of omnibuses on the crowded road and safely gained the other side, unseen by her pursuer, whether she went down head-foremost into some haven of refuge below, whose uplifted grating presented itself conveniently in her need, or whether some open shop door received her little flashing quivering body within its hospitable portals—will never now be rightly known—and is moreover unimportant to this tale to discover. Suffice it to say, that the prey escaped, and that Johnny was left standing breathless and discomfited in the middle of the pavement, looking about him in disconsolate dismay. Presently, however, he caught sight of the trees of the Park and a fresh excitement arose in his childish mind. He had not seen any trees since he had left Fairmead—these, no doubt, were the self-same trees he had left behind there. He started off at a trot to get to them.

They were brown and leafless, it is true, but still they were real trees, and presently he caught sight of real green grass beneath them, and his excitement knew no bounds.

Little recked the child of the dangers into which he was rushing, when, filled with the one idea of reaching that beautiful grass as quickly as possible, he dashed fearlessly into the crowded thoroughfare opposite the Marble Arch.

A brougham and a pair of smart stepping brown horses were turning out of the Park. There was a coronet on the carriage, and a sleek well-fed coachman and footman sat on the box, and there were two ladies, one middle-aged but still pretty, and the other young and very handsome, inside.

Suddenly there was a cry, a rush of people from the side, a shout from a policeman running hastily forward, and with a violent jerk backwards that sent the handsome brown horses almost on their haunches, the brougham came suddenly to a standstill. "Good gracious, what on earth is the matter?" cried the elder lady, putting her head out of the window.

There was a crowd already hemming in the carriage, for it is astonishing in what a twinkling of an eye a crowd will gather in a London street, and some cried one thing, and some another.

"What a shame," shouted one, "he might have pulled up in time, instead of knocking down a little thing like that!"

The coachman angrily defended himself.

"What is it?" repeated Lady Mary eagerly, "is any one hurt? What has happened?"

The tall footman shouldered his way through the crowd.

"It's a little boy, my lady, ran out just in front of the 'osses, it wasn't Baines's fault, the child oughtn't to have run across."

"Is he run over? is he hurt?" cried Lady Mary breathlessly. "Let me out at once, Thomas."

"My dear Lady Mary," remonstrated Agnes; "pray do not get out in all this dreadful crowd, you will be crushed to pieces."

"Let me out instantly," was all she said, addressing the footman, who opened the door and helped her out.

Miss Verinder knew better than to subject her grey plush mantle to the hustling of a shabbily dressed crowd—she sat on safely, but disgustedly in her corner.

"How I hate Quixotic people!" she thought; "why on earth couldn't she leave it to the police to manage? and now we shall be late for my appointment with Mrs. Waterson!"

Lady Mary was kneeling upon the ground, tenderly supporting in her arms the prostrate form of a tiny child. His face was white as death, his lips were bloodless, his eyelids closed. His long dark eyelashes swept his shrunken white cheeks where the blue veins could be plainly traced beneath the fine delicate skin. He did not move.

"Oh—is he dead? is he dead?" cried Lady Mary with a great gush of womanly pity at her heart, "fetch a doctor somebody at once."

"I think he's only swooned, mum," said one of the policemen, who was helping to keep off the crowd from the little fallen figure. "I don't think the 'oss touched him, only to knock him over."

"I know he didn't, my lady," here put in the coachman, who had babies of his own and was sincerely distressed by what had happened. "I pulled up as sharp as ever I could, and Sultan he shoved him down, but he didn't kick out a bit, he stood as still as a lamb, another inch and he must have stepped on him, but I see what happened, he's only bruised a bit, and his head hit against the road pretty hard, that's all."

"We'd best take him to the hospital in a cab, mum," said the policeman. "Shall I call one?"

"I will take him myself, not to the hospital, but to my own house," she answered with decision, gathering the little frail morsel of humanity up in her arms.

"Let me carry him for you," said a gentleman standing in

the crowd. But Lady Mary clung to her charge, he was so light, such a very feather-weight, a child could have lifted him.

The footman opened the carriage door.

Miss Verinder shrank back into her corner.

"Oh, not in here! surely not in here, Lady Mary," she cried, recoiling in deep dismay. "You cannot possibly take the poor little wretch in the carriage. Why—he is filthy! his clothes are covered with mud!"

Lady Mary looked at her. There was a gleam of contempt in her eyes—for the first time her beautiful favourite failed to please her. "You can get out and go home in a cab, if you prefer it, Agnes," she replied coldly, and lifted the child without another word into the carriage. "Thomas, jump into a hansom at once," she said, turning to the footman, "go and find Dr. Graham and tell him to come to Hill Street instantly, as quickly as he can."

Then she gave her address to the policeman and bade him call, so that he might aid her in discovering who the child belonged to, and, the crowd quickly dispersing, the carriage drove rapidly back to Hill Street.

Little Johnny lay for some moments as though, in truth, his white little soul had for ever fled away to some happier world.

Lady Mary chafed his cold hands and held her salts bottle to his nose, Agnes never offering to help her, but sitting in the opposite corner with her smart dress well gathered about her, lest it should brush against the muddy little boots that hung over the side of the elder woman's lap, whilst she regarded the whole performance with an expression of repulsion and dislike impossible to describe.

Lady Mary only seemed to her to have gone mad.

Just as they were turning into Hill Street, a quiver passed over the child's frame, and with a long soft sigh the lips parted slowly, and the breath of life came back to him. His eyes opened slowly and fixed themselves gravely and a little vacantly upon the kindly woman's face so close above his own.

"He is alive! he is alive, thank God!" cried Lady Mary, with something like a sob of joy. "You are quite safe, darling, with friends, don't be afraid."

But Johnny was not at all frightened. The vacant eyes little by little grew into life and consciousness. What bright brown eyes they were, so like that other pair that were gazing eagerly down into them! Presently a little colour stole back into the baby lips, and he smiled quite happily and confidently up at her.

"See, see, Agnes, he is smiling, he cannot be much hurt."

"Well, that is a comfort at any rate. I am sure I hope that policeman will find out who he belongs to and come and take him away to his parents—the whole of our morning will be wasted as it is."

Lady Mary scarcely heard her. She had raised the child's head on to her shoulder, he lifted his hand uneasily to his forehead and murmured in his baby tongue :

"Zonny's head bad," and his eyes closed again wearily and dully.

The carriage stopped at their own door, and Lady Mary carried the child tenderly into the house and upstairs to her own bedroom.

Presently Dr. Graham arrived and was closeted for some time with her upstairs, and Agnes, walking about in angry impatience up and down the drawing-room below, began to realize the distressing fact that the important claims of her trousseau were to be entirely laid aside for the present, for that Lady Mary intended evidently to devote herself to this "beggar's brat," as she called him in her own mind, to the complete oblivion of her own affairs.

This being the case, she determined to go out with her maid, and find her own amusements at Howell and James's and Marshall and Snelgrove's.

When she returned, some two hours later, Lady Mary was coming down the staircase. Her sweet, wrinkled face was beaming, and she seemed to have forgotten Agnes's ungraciousness, for she took her eagerly by the hands.

"My dear, the best of news!"

"You have found the child's parents?"

"Oh, no. Not a chance of it! There is not a single mark on any of his clothes. That is nothing. But Dr. Graham says there are no bones broken, and no internal injuries at all. He was only stunned with the fall and shaken by the fright, and must be kept in bed for a day or so. But only think, Agnes! Dr. Graham says he never saw such a thin child in all his life; it is quite terrible, he is nothing but skin and bone—he must have been literally starving! Isn't it shocking? He is to have beef tea and chicken broth, and turtle soup and milk, everything I can think of—" and the dear little lady looked so happy, as some women—God bless them!—do, when they are able to be of practical use to their fellow-creatures, and yet all the time the gold-brown eyes were full of unshed tears.

Agnes deemed it judicious to kiss her affectionately and to express some sort of sympathy for the child.

"Poor little creature! how lucky for him to have fallen into such kind hands as yours, dearest Lady Mary!—but I do hope you will find out who he belongs to."

"Oh, I don't care about that! I should like to keep him."

"To *keep* him!" repeated Agnes aghast. "What, *always*?"

"Yes—why not? I am devoted to children, and now you are taking Jack from me, I should like something to look after. Ah, and do you know, my dear, it is the most extra-

ordinary coincidence of course, but this child reminds me so strongly of what Jack was at his age! Is it not strange? The same bright, brown eyes and tiny features and long, tapering fingers like Jack's—only dear Jack never looked half-starved as this poor mite does."

Agnes treated this, of course, as a flight of fancy, and smiled indulgently at the notion. At the bottom of her heart she earnestly trusted that Lady Mary might soon grow tired of her new fancy, or that the child's relations might come and claim him—she even went to the length next morning of examining the advertisements in the papers, but nobody seemed to have lost a child, and her future mother-in-law was more eager than ever to retain her new toy.

Johnny got better—he lay wide awake in his bed, he ate his food ravenously, he played with a wooden soldier which was brought to him, he complained no longer of his head. By the afternoon of the second day he was taken out of bed and dressed in a new suit of clothes, which Lady Mary had sent out her maid to buy for him, and sat quite happily upon his benefactress' lap by the fireside. Lady Mary thought it her duty to question him.

"Who is your father, my dear?"

"No farzer," replied Johnny, quite gaily, as though mentioning an amusing fact.

"And your mother?"

"'Es—want muzzer—Zonny want muzzer," and the brown eyes looked eagerly, and a little pitifully about the room, as though in quest of her.

"Where does your mother live, Johnny?"

"In steet," replied Johnny, with decision.

"Which street?"

"Dirty steet," answered the child.

"Can't you remember the name of the street? Try, Johnny."

Johnny only shook his head and became wrapped up in the entrancing occupation of steadyng his wooden soldier on Lady Mary's elbow.

"Who lived in the street?" persisted Lady Mary.

"Yellow Titty!" replied Johnny, with a sudden animation. "I'se wun after Titty, and Titty wun away—Zonny couldn't catch Titty, 'cos she wun so fast."

Nothing more could be extracted from him. Once or twice he said that he "wanted muzzer," and his little face assumed a pitiful expression when Lady Mary told him she was afraid his mother could not come to him—but, child-like, he soon began to forget her, and to cling to the motherly arms of the kind woman who devoted herself to him. Lady Mary's elderly maid, too, came in for a share of his devotion, but from the beautiful Miss Verinder he shrank away in terror--nothing would make him go to her.

It was the evening of the second day, and Johnny had been put to bed. A little cot had been made up in the dressing-room, opening out of Lady Mary's room. After her dinner she stole upstairs to look at him. Johnny lay in the beautiful sleep of innocent childhood. Good food and care, had already wrought a change in him ; there was a delicate flush on his cheeks, his tumbled locks strayed upon the pillow, and his breath went and came with delicious regularity through his rosebud baby lips.

Lady Mary bent down over his bed, shading the candle with her hands from his face. A mother who has loved her child never forgets what he was like in infancy, and the extraordinary likeness of this little waif to her own son in his childhood, struck her once more with a strange and almost startling force.

Not only that, but on this baby brow, just where it was knit into a soft wrinkle between the eyebrows, there was a something—she hardly knew what—that recalled Lord Castlemere's face to her.

Her own grew a little pale, and she drew back with a strange quickening of her pulses—what wild thought was this which flashed suddenly through her mind ?

At that moment the child stirred uneasily, his thin little hand, flung back upon the pillow, was stretched out towards her, and from his half-open lips there came a faint mutter of baby words. Lady Mary bent down again over the cot.

“Muzzer—my poor muzzer—” muttered Johnny in his dreams. “Pay God, take care of muzzer.”

The clock on the chimney-piece struck half-past nine.

Out in the streets it was raw and foggy—the pavements were damp—the lamps gleamed with a faint and sickly light through the murky atmosphere.

Mrs. Waterson was driving home to the cosy house in the Regent's Park in a hansom. She was very late to-night—late and very tired. Her day's work had been full of worries. One of her women had spoilt a velvet skirt she was cutting out, and then had been so impudent over it that she had had to send her away—another, a useful girl employed in the mantle-room, was ill with congestion of the lungs, and had not been able to come—added to which, in addition to all her ordinary work, she had a large and very important order for a lady's trousseau on hand ; and the lady having failed to keep her morning's appointment for the fitting of her wedding dress, everything, as far as that essential garment was concerned, had been at a standstill the whole day. Constance Waterson had seldom felt so worn out and so worried—she had eaten nothing but a couple of sandwiches, and her head ached from sheer exhaustion and fatigue.

Yet, as the hansom swung quickly round the corner of one of those dingy little streets through which lay her daily road to her home, her quick eyes caught sight of something which caused her to stop the cab and jump hastily out of it. A woman lay motionless, upon her face, upon the pavement. The shabby, slender figure seemed familiar to her.

"I'd let 'er be, mum," said the cabman respectfully, "she's only one o' them drunk 'uns—it's the business of the police to look a' ter such as she."

But Constance had turned the woman's face towards the sickly glare of the lamp, and had recognised her at once as the girl in whose daily movements she had for so long taken such an unaccountable interest.

"She is not drunk, she is only ill," she said to the cabman; "I know her. I am going to take her home with me. Will you help me to get her into the cab?"

The man, grumbling a little, but hoping to be paid extra for the unaccustomed work, got down from his box. Between them they lifted the unconscious woman into the cab, which drove quickly on towards the Regent's Park. At that very moment the church clocks, in harmonious chorus, were striking half-past nine.

Thus, in their direst need, these two poor waifs—the child and the mother—cast away upon the pitiless desert of the London streets, had been each strangely and almost miraculously rescued, by the friendly hands of utter strangers, from the dangers and perils which so hardly beset them.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

"The heart bowed down by weight of woe
To weakest hope will cling."

—ALFRED BUNN.

IN a large airy room, lighted by a skylight, a score or so of young women are seated at work. There is a litter of bright-hued silks and trimmings, a shimmer of delicate frillings and laces, a general effect as of a wind-blown flower garden in a condition of wild disorder, all over the room. The girls all look healthy and contented; there is not much open talking, save about their work amongst them, but there are covert whisperings and low-voiced jokes passed occasionally from one to the other, generally accompanied by nervous looks in the direction of the door, whence at any moment Mrs. Waterson herself or one of the head "young ladies" with beautiful figures clad in wrinkleless black silk, may be expected to emerge.

Most of these girls, who work hard, rising early and sitting up late in order to fashion the many-hued raiment of their richer and luckier fellow-women, are good-natured-looking,

but not specially interesting or attractive in appearance, all save one who sits apart bending over her work, a delicate filmy flounce of creamy white which she is diligently employed in hemming.

It is a month since Constance Waterson, out of the charity of her large womanly heart, had taken Madge home in her hansom and put her to bed in the little spare room in her pretty house in the Regent's Park. Since then Madge had been very ill with a sharp attack of brain fever, and all her pretty gold brown tresses had been cut off quite short and her soft hair clustered now in short curly rings all round her small thoroughbred head. When she got well enough to remember and to talk, her first agonized questionings were after her boy, and Mrs. Waterson's tender sympathy soon drew from her the whole story of her sorrows and misfortunes. She told her all, only keeping back from her the name of the man to whose ill-fated love she owed the whole desolation of her life.

"You have been indeed good to me," said the poor girl whilst tears of weakness streamed from her eyes, "but it would have been kinder to have left me to die—I wish—oh, how I wish I had died!"

"You must not say that, Madge, if it had been your appointed time to die God would certainly not have suffered me to rescue you from death," by which it will be seen that Constance was something of a fatalist in her views.

"But what have I to live for?" cried Madge brokenly. "My child was all I had left to me, and now I have lost him for ever."

"That is not in the least likely, my dear. London is certainly a large place, but it is not so large but that time and money and interest can sift it through from end to end. I will help you to find your boy. I know a gentleman who is Chief Commissioner of the Police, he was a friend of my father's, he will do anything for me, I shall place the matter in his hands. You cannot help by rushing about the streets yourself, you must learn to wait and be patient until we hear something more."

"And starve in the meantime!" cried Madge, striking her hands passionately together. "Mrs. Waterson, I have not a penny in the world! how I am to repay all I owe you I cannot imagine, how I can live in the future I do not know. There is nothing but despair before me! It were better that I had died!"

"Now you are talking foolishly; there need be no such thing as despair for any of us. My dear, I have gone through the mill of adversity myself, and I know. I have known what it is to be hungry, and to see my children hungry too—and that as you know, you poor child, is fifty

thousand times worse ! But as to despairing, not one of us has any right to do that, as long as life and brains are left to us. There is always some path open to us to take—for you in fact I can see two."

"What do you mean, Mrs. Waterson ?"

"Wait a minute and I will tell you. But to begin with, don't talk about paying me back, because you know I don't expect such a thing and it only makes me angry when you say it. It has given me pleasure to help you, and I can, thank God, afford myself such pleasures now. I want to help you still more, if you will only meet me half way and help yourself."

Madge nestled up to her with a little caressing action which was infinitely charming and loveable.

"Now I will tell you what you can do, dear child," continued Mrs. Waterson. "You can in the first place return to your old aunt's house."

"Oh, no ! no !—"

"Well, I don't say that you ought to do so—only that you can if you choose."

"She would never forgive me. You do not know her. And I could not leave London whilst my boy is still unfound."

"Very well, we will say no more about that. So now we will come to the other thing. You must put your pride in your pocket and come and work for me when you are strong enough."

"Pride, Mrs. Waterson ! Could I have such a thing as pride ? Oh, do you think I really can work for you ? I would do it for nothing gladly if you think I can only be of use to you."

"Well, I don't want you to do it for nothing, because that would be foolish. I don't say the pay is very much, but it is something to keep you alive anyhow, and if you are quick and ready, you will soon make yourself useful in the work-room. I want more hands. I am very busy just now, we are in the middle of a large and very elaborate trousseau which has to be ready by the first week in December. I cannot as a fact get workers enough, and you will be a help to me. But of course I shall pay you, just as I pay the others, and you can stay on here for the present, I shall be glad of your company at home and if you like you can give me something towards your keep as long as you are with me. So now, my dear, dry your tears and make haste and get well as soon as you can."

Strengthened and cheered by the tonic of this brisk little woman's sensible advice and kindly help, Madge grew daily stronger, and her naturally healthy constitution shook off the effects of her sharp attack of illness in an incredibly short time.

But for the harrowing anxiety which preyed upon her with regard to Johnny, she would have been almost happy.

Even about this, she grew to be more patient and hopeful when she had seen the gentleman in whose hands Mrs. Waterson placed the case, and had received his assurances that the child could not have been killed or starved to death or else the fact would by now have come to his knowledge, that he must certainly be under the protection of some charitable persons, and that no stone should be left unturned to find him.

Madge went to her work amongst the young women in the large work-room, with a patient if not a contented heart. Even here her kind friend's thoughtfulness smoothed the way for her beforehand. She was introduced to the rest as a friend of Mrs. Waterson's anxious to learn the business, only light and easy work was to be set to her, and the girl who sat next to her at the long table was told to help her in anything which she found difficult.

She had always been quick and clever with her needle, and after the first day or two when she became more accustomed to the work she encountered no difficulties to speak of. Miss Collings, the girl who sat next to her, found little occasion to help her, and the head woman in the room was pleased with her neatness and natural ability.

True, the social atmosphere of the workshop was neither instructive nor entertaining, the conversation ran mostly upon the dresses under construction—when they were to be finished, whose dinner-gown was to go home that night, what fresh orders had come in—what alterations had to be made.

But of all that was talked about, and all the customers whose clothes were discussed, no one came in for more criticism than the bride elect, whose trousseau was the chief object of everybody's thought and labour.

Madge, with her thoughts often far away in other scenes and other memories, caught herself more than once listening almost unconsciously to the chatter around her.

“Where is that gold trimming, Miss Collings ?”

“I laid it on the table, Miss Dunn.”

“Is it for the green velvet or for the black silk ?”

“For the black, of course. I say that pale green satin won't suit her a bit, will it, Miss Evans ?”

“No, it won't. I was in the room when Mademoiselle was fitting her with it. I was holding the pins, you know—it don't suit her complexion, she's too dark—nor yet her figure neither. Nobody would believe it who hadn't known it for a fact, that her waist measures twenty-two !”

“It's her being so tall makes it look less,” said another.

And her arms—my ! they are fat ! I don't call it pretty, do you, Miss Dunn ? Just look at this sleeve—it might be for a leg of pork !”

"It's nothing to Miss de Vere's—*she's* got an arm if you like!"

"And a waist, too," cried another. "Twenty-eight inches her plush tea-gown measured from button to button-hole—and I ought to know as I had all the bother of it! And then there's Mrs. Haliford, *she's* got a waist if you like!"

And so on and so on! Every lady's size, height, and appearance being freely criticised and commented upon in turn. Oh! if only some of these fine fashionable ladies had heard them! Who can be a goddess to her dressmaker, still less to her dressmaker's apprentices!

One day Mrs. Waterson came into the room and silently handed to Madge a letter which she had received. It was from Colonel Drummond, the Police Commissioner. A child picked up in the streets about the time when Johnny had been lost had been almost certainly traced to a certain district in Whitechapel—by this evening he would have fuller information, and if, as he hoped, it was the right little boy he would send him up to Regent's Park with a special messenger for his mother to identify him. Madge's heart beat wildly as she read, and her eyes brimming over with a great joy met Mrs. Waterson's as she stood opposite her. Constance placed her finger upon her lips and silently stretched out her hand for the letter again. It was not the time nor the place to speak about it now, but she had not been able to resist coming upstairs herself to bring this ray of hope and comfort to the mother's heart. Her eyes flashed her happy congratulations, but she went on giving sundry small directions to the women as though that had been the sole object of her visit to the work-room.

One of the forewomen came in at that moment.

"Lady Mary is here, ma'am, with Miss Verinder, to try on the wedding boddice."

Mrs. Waterson hastened away, turning back to say, as she left the room followed by the head-fitter:

"One of you girls will be wanted, too—Miss Durham." Madge half rose from her chair to obey, and then Constance fancied she saw a reluctant shyness in her face and added quickly, "No, not Miss Durham—Miss Collings will be the best. Poor child," she thought to herself as she hurried downstairs to receive her customers, "she would rather, I dare-say, sit quiet and think over the good news in that letter!"

Oh—if Madge had only gone! If only she had known who was there, in the show-room, dressed up in a smart little velvet tunic and clinging to Lady Mary's silken skirts—how she would have flown downstairs!

By-and-bye when Miss Collings came back again, she began talking to her neighbours, in a low voice, about the ladies in the show-room.

“Miss Verinder—that is the bride you know, Miss Durham—wore a dove-grey cloth dress and a mantle to match, with a chinchilla muff and cape, and a little grey hat and feather. She did look lovely! She’s like that beautiful lady used to act at the Alhambra last winter, don’t you remember? Oh, no, you are a country girl you say, and don’t know the theatres. Well, she was that tall and handsome she might have been a Duchess—just like Miss Verinder, and Lady Mary——”

“Is Lady Mary her mother?” asked Madge, with but a languid interest, for she was thinking about Colonel Drummond’s letter.

“No—she’s her future ma-in-law—Miss Verinder is to marry her Ladyship’s son.

It did not occur to Madge to enquire this gentleman’s name. What was Lady Mary to her?

“Her Ladyship brought such a sweet little boy with her, to-day,” continued Miss Collings presently, reaching across Madge to get a reel of silk from the table. “Her grandson, I suppose.”

“Yes? Was he pretty?”

“Oh, a *dear* little fellow, and he was so prettily dressed in a little black velvet suit with a broad red sash round his waist, and a falling collar of Guipure lace, and he was jumping about wanting to play with me whilst I was holding the pins for Mademoiselle. I was so amused with him—and her Ladyship she seemed so fond of him she could hardly attend to the fitting of Miss Verinder’s bodice for looking after the child.”

But it never occurred to Madge to ask what the boy was like! To Miss Collings his smart clothes were evidently of far more importance than his face—it is doubtful indeed whether she would have been able to remember the colour of his eyes and hair.

And so her child had been for a whole half-hour in the very same house with her, and she had never known it! nor that it was Jack’s mother who had brought him there. For it will be remembered that long ago in his foolishness Jack had concealed his mother’s name from her with the false and mistaken egotism which had made him desire to win her love for himself, independently of his position and prospects in the world. As if such a one as Madge Durham would ever have been capable of loving him for any mean or unworthy motive!

So Fate, that had played such strange tricks with her life, conjured away her chances once more, and left her in ignorance still.

That night, too, a bitter disappointment awaited her—the little boy who had been found in Whitechapel was duly sent

up under the care of a policeman to Mrs. Waterson's house, but when he arrived there—it was not Johnny!

It was a sallow-faced, swarthy-complexioned child, with a heavy brow and thick under-bred features—his eyes indeed were brown, and he might have been three or four years old—and there the resemblance ended. The detectives had followed a wrong clue!

The blow was so bitter and unexpected—for somehow both women had made certain that it could be no other child than Johnny—that Madge laid awake crying and sighing the whole night long; and a fresh paroxysm of utter despair concerning the fate of her boy overwhelmed her. Even Mrs. Waterson looked grave and anxious at breakfast time the next morning, and could find no new consolations to suggest.

She could only preach patience and resignation, and murmur vaguely that she must wait and try and have faith in the goodness of God.

It all sounded very trite and commonplace even to herself, as she uttered the words, for at her heart she began to fear that Johnny would never be found. Either he must be dead, or else he had been taken out of London, and would be heard of no more. Such experiences have been known.

The best thing for Madge to do, would be to learn to be resigned to the worst, and to make up her mind to live without him. She did not like to say so, but that was what she thought.

Madge would have liked to have stayed away from her work that day. But Mrs. Waterson had too much good sense to allow her to do so. To stop at home and cry would only make matters worse, and occupation was the best and safest tonic for her. So they started together as usual, and Madge before the day was over was glad that she braced herself up to the effort.

Towards evening, however, Mrs. Waterson coming up into the work-room saw that Madge was looking so worn and tired that her heart bled for her.

"Are you feeling ill, Miss Durham?" she enquired kindly—calling her, as she always did before the others, by her surname.

"My head aches a good deal," answered Madge wearily.

"A breath of air would do you good. Put away your work and go and do something for me. You may as well go as anyone else." She summoned her downstairs and gave her some directions.

There were some patterns to be taken to Miss Verinder for her to choose from, and she was to wait and bring them back with her answer.

When Madge got to Hill Street it was seven o'clock. Miss Verinder had gone up to her bedroom to dress for dinner.

The patterns were sent upstairs, and Madge waited in the hall. Presently Miss Verinder's smart lady's maid tripped lightly down the staircase.

"Will you step up to Miss Verinder's room, please? she wishes you to take a message to Mrs. Waterson."

Madge followed her in silence.

On the first bedroom landing she met Lady Mary coming out of a door which she carefully closed behind her—from within, there came a subdued gleam as from a shaded light and the soft crooning refrain of a nursery rhyme.

The voice was neither young nor harmonious, for it was only old Mason, Lady Mary's maid, singing her mistress' adopted little boy to sleep.

' Hush a bye baby on the tree top,
When the wind blows the cradle will rock,"

came the familiar droning, sing-song words, which struck with a strange gush of pain and recollection into the heart of the stranger passing by on the staircase outside.

"Hush a bye baby—baby," and then the door closed behind Lady Mary, and she heard no more.

"Who is this?" enquired the mistress of the house of the servant.

"A young person, my lady, from Mrs. Waterson's."

Lady Mary glanced at her carelessly. "What a ladylike-looking girl," she thought, "and what a sweet, interesting face she has."

"Miss Verinder is in her room, is she not?"

"Yes, my lady."

Madge followed the maid upstairs, and Lady Mary went through an adjoining room into her own bedroom.

Miss Verinder took a long time over the patterns, comparing them one with the other and selecting the particular shade of green satin that she fancied would suit her complexion best.

Wrapped in a soft white cashmere dressing gown with swan's-down at the throat and wrists, she stood under the gaslight by the dressing-table discussing the matter with her maid and holding the patterns up against her face and admiring their effect in her glass, whilst the young woman from the dressmaker's, in the quiet black dress, and with the still, sad face, awaited her pleasure near the door.

Madge watched the brilliant woman under the lamplight with all the ungrudging admiration of a generous mind.

"How handsome she is," she thought. "What glorious eyes, and how fine that thick dark hair looks flowing down her back. So that is the bride, they talk about so much. Well, she is beautiful indeed; I hope she may be happy, and that the man she is going to marry will be good to her and not make her life wretched as Aunt Durham says all husbands do."

"Come here to the light," said Miss Verinder, turning suddenly towards her. "Why do you stand out there in the dark without offering to help? Tell me which Mrs. Waterson thinks will light up the best of these shades and which you think suits me best." She spoke imperiously and somewhat unpleasantly. Graciousness to her inferiors was not one of Miss Verinder's virtues. Her servants hated her. Madge coloured a little at the loud, overbearing voice.

Her illusions vanished. She came forward obediently and gave her mind and her attention to the patterns and to sundry messages concerning them with which Miss Verinder charged her for her employer.

When the important subject was decided Agnes went to the writing-table and drew her cheque-book out of a drawer.

"You may as well take this cheque to Mrs. Waterson. I told her that I want to pay her separately for that fur cloak, I don't wish it to go down with the rest of the things, and she has sent me in a bill for it. Can you receipt it?"

Madge said she could. Once before she had signed her own name and Mrs. Waterson's beneath it, at the foot of a bill, according to Constance's directions.

When Agnes had filled in the cheque she laid it, together with the account, on the table, and Madge took the pen in her hand to write as desired.

As she bent over the writing-table, Agnes was suddenly struck with the grace of the stooping figure. She looked at her for the first time as a woman, and not as a machine, and noted with something like surprise the perfect outlines of the well-poised head with its crown of short, soft, gold-glinted curls, the small, shell-like ear and the delicate outline of the pure oval cheek.

When Madge lifted her face, Miss Verinder looked at her attentively. She remarked that her eyes were of a lovely blue and her features remarkably pretty. She was a selfish, self-absorbed woman, yet so unlike the ordinary "milliner's girl" was this messenger from her dressmaker, that she could not help being struck by the difference.

"People say that Mrs. Waterson was a lady by birth," she thought. "No doubt this girl is some relation of hers—some younger sister or cousin—which would account for the refinement of her appearance."

And after Madge had gone she had the curiosity to take up the receipted bill in order to see what name was written upon it.

She remained staring at it in utter amazement. Across the stamp was written in clear characters :

"Madge Durham,
For Mrs. Waterson."

"By all that is wonderful it is 'the creature,' herself!"

cried Agnes, in breathless excitement, scarcely daring to credit her own eyes. "I *knew* she was not dead! What a miraculous coincidence! and what a lie my dear, superior Jack took the trouble to tell me! What wouldn't I give to bring him face to face with her. What fun it would be, for of course he knows all about her! What a fool he would look! and what a trump card to play, if ever I want to get the better of him!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

SUSPICIONS.

"Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,
Is the immediate jewel of their souls."

—SHAKESPEARE.

FOR some time after the departure of the ladies from Castle Regis, the two friends pursued various forms of sport together with unabated ardour.

Hunting—for it was now November—had begun in earnest, and Lance and Jack hunted four days a week and shot pheasants on the other two. In the evenings they were both tired out with the day's exercise, and dozed peacefully, one on either side of the fireplace, over their newspapers and pipes.

Lord Castlemere was away a good deal. Castle Regis disagreed with him in the autumn months, and now that Lady Mary was no longer an inmate of his house, he spent his time in paying visits to his friends in different parts of the country.

But although the two men were thus thrown entirely upon each other's society, there was, for some time, no renewal between them of a subject which, nevertheless, occupied many of their secret thoughts.

Lance fancied that there was a change in his friend. He was taciturn and often moody. Sometimes they would ride for hours side by side together in going to, or coming back from hunting, and yet Jack would not utter a single word.

If Lance spoke to him he would start as though awaking from a dream, and rouse himself with an evident effort for a moment to reply to his remarks, only to lapse again immediately into the same gloomy silence. Once or twice, too, he had turned suddenly to his friend as though impelled to unburden himself of something of importance, but when he was apparently upon the point of speaking, something always held him back and he would look away again in embarrassment, his lips closing together firmly as though to check the utterance of words he might afterwards regret.

Lance wondered what it all meant. He knew well that Jack's nature was reserved to a fault and that only great trouble would ever force him into needless confidences, and

yet with an unerring instinct he divined that he longed to confide in him if only he dared to do so.

The moment when Jack could no longer hold his peace was nearer than he imagined.

Ever since that momentous conversation between them on the subject of Madge's death, Jack's conscience had been terribly awake within him, and all Lance's vague doubts and uncertainties recurred to him again and again with a cruel insistence.

The idea that she might be alive began to haunt him. The whole fabric of his own long-established convictions concerning her having fallen to the earth like a pack of cards by the fact of her having written to Lance so short a time ago, seemed to leave him in a chaos of uncertainty concerning her fate, which daily increased upon him.

How was it possible for him to marry Agnes Verinder unless he could be certain that his first wife was actually dead? As the days went by, he pondered over the problem more and more, and he began to think as Lance had thought, that if there had been deceit used at one time, there was nothing to prove that there had not been foul play at another.

Sometimes he wondered whether the letter that Lance had received had been a forgery, and sometimes—remembering that she had never answered nor responded even to his first letter in any way—it seemed to him that there must have been a plot invented by her people to defraud him of her and to make him abandon her altogether. His thoughts began to dwell upon her, not as one long loved and lost, who had gone to a better world, but as one who lived still somewhere and might at any time return to him.

She began to visit him in his dreams. Night after night he would fancy that Madge, sweet and fresh as the country flowers amongst which he had wooed and won her, stood smiling by his bedside, beckoning to him to follow her with those slender hands which he remembered so well. Sometimes the vision of her was so real and life-like that he would awaken with a cry—with her name upon his lips and all the agony of losing her again in his beating heart.

At length there came a day when he realised that at any cost he must find out something more about her.

He remembered a man who might be able to help him. He remembered the Rev. Cyril Storey. Secretly, and without speaking of his intention to Lance, he wrote to him at the vicarage of Cumpton-on-the-Hill. His letter was guarded and very judicious. He wrote in a casual and friendly fashion, asked for news of his old friend, said how much he would like to see him again, was he married or still single? Had the fever of last summer affected his parish much? Then quite at the end he wrote, "I hear sad news of Fair-

mead Hall ; which of the old ladies was it who died there a few months ago ? I have lost sight of them now, and should like to know."

He regarded this letter as a very *chef d'œuvre* of diplomacy. Storey could neither be surprised nor startled by such guarded enquiries concerning the aunts of the girl he had married, and if, on the other hand, he knew that it was Madge who had died, surely he would make some allusion to the fact in his reply.

His cleverness was thrown away. After a week his own letter came back to him through the dead letter office with a large "not known" scrawled across the envelope.

Then at last he was reduced to speaking to Lance ; still, however, adhering to his intention of jealously keeping from him the secret romance of his past.

"What became of Cyril Storey, Lance ?" he asked suddenly of him as they were jogging along to the meet that morning through a network of narrow and muddy lanes.

"Now, what a curious thing you should mention him," cried Lance. "I was just thinking about him. I saw the birth of a child of his in the paper this morning."

"What, is he married then ?"

"Oh, yes, long ago—didn't you know ? He married three years ago, a girl with a lot of money I believe, a Miss Graves—trust those parsons for picking up the heiresses !"

"Where is he living ? I should like to see him again."

"Well, that you can't do, because he got a chaplaincy in India through his wife's people, and I see that he is at the present moment at Simla."

"And so he left Cumpton-on-the-Hill, then ?"

"Oh, yes, he left it very soon after your poor father's death, I believe—after we left the dear old *Naiad*, you know—I had a letter from him at the time. He had another living given him in the north of England, where, I believe, he met Miss Graves and married her at a very short notice. She was pretty too, I heard," added Lance contemplatively.

But Jack was totally uninterested in Miss Graves's personal appearance ; he remained silent.

In that direction, at all events, there was nothing further to be discovered.

He might have saved himself the trouble of writing to Cumpton-on-the-Hill if he had consulted Lance in the first instance, and he might have saved a whole week which he had wasted in waiting for an answer to that letter.

It was now the fourteenth of November, and his wedding-day was fixed for the tenth of December.

Between this and then, he must know the truth. He could not marry Agnes, if even at some remote corner of the earth Madge yet lived, neither, on the other hand, could he for

the second time break his faith to Miss Verinder on the bare suspicion of a doubt that might be only in his own imagination.

"Lance," he said to his friend that night, "I have made up my mind to run down to Fairley—will you go with me?"

Mr. Parker looked exceedingly agitated. Had Jack let off a rocket between them on the hearthrug he could not, in fact, have been more startled.

He jumped up from his chair and walked half across the room and back before he was able to answer, and his voice was rough and uncompromising when he spoke at last.

"What do you want to go there for?"

"Lance, I must—I *must* know if Madge is dead," replied the other earnestly.

"You doubt it then?"

"Did you not doubt it yourself? Did you not say so?"

"My dear fellow, my own doubts—well, perhaps I should not have mentioned them—God knows they are intangible enough! If I had not, fool that I am, clung to a straw with the despair of a drowning man, I should not perhaps have revived what must always be a most painful subject between us. In the future, I do not say that I might not be weak enough to take some sort of steps to find out what became of her, but for the present, take my advice, Jack, and let it alone."

"I do not understand you, Lance—you are speaking in riddles."

"Then it is high time you should understand me, Jack," cried Lance. "We have talked in riddles too long it seems to me, now let us have no more misapprehensions about it."

He had stopped before Jack's chair. Short, and fat, and uncouth as he was, there was yet a certain dignity about him; he was so terribly in earnest. The time for empty civilities was gone by, the time for grim and sober truth had come.

"Look here, Jack, you are the best of good fellows, and you are my dearest friend. But there is something that is even more sacred than friendship—"

"My dear Lance—"

"No, do not interrupt me, listen to me to the end, and then you shall say what you like. You know that I loved Madge Durham—let there be no further mysteries between us—I loved her, as I am never likely to love anybody else in this world again. But to you I resigned her, not for your sake, but for hers, because I had reason to believe that she loved you, and not me."

Jack's head was bent; he leant forward upon his knees and his whole attitude was one of intense dejection.

"Whether you loved her or no—"

"I *did* love her, Lance," he said gently.

"Well, you may have done so, I will take your word for it, as you say so, but whether you wooed her honestly and

bravely, or selfishly left her to eat out her heart in despair and loneliness, is what you alone know and is what I will not now seek to wrest from you ; that secret lies buried in your own heart and, as I most sadly fear, in *her* grave. That is of the past, nothing can retrieve it. Only for the present it has become my turn. You are about to be married ; you are pledged to a beautiful woman whom you have deliberately chosen for your wife ; you can have nothing more to do with Madge Durham. Dead or alive she is mine. If she is dead, then it is I alone who have a right to mourn her ; if, by any miracle, she be still alive, then it is I who will win her. I have been faithful to her. I gave her up to you once, and you flung her love away. I will not give her up to you a second time."

" You do not understand, Lance ; you do not know all," groaned Jack.

But Lance was no longer capable of hearing him.

" I have a right to her," he repeated with a sort of angry exultation. " Alive or dead I have a right to her ! Stand back, therefore, from the grave by which you have no claim to weep ; keep away from the dregs of a life which you have shattered by your coldness and neglect. You shall not go to Fairley—it is I who will go there, and I will go alone ! Now, if you have anything to say, say on." He flung himself back in his chair and waited. But Jack never spoke nor lifted his head.

He could not bring himself to confess the truth. Even at this moment, when he realised of what vital importance to his whole future it was that he should allay every shadow of a doubt, he could not bring himself to speak the words which should disclose the sealed chapter of his secret marriage.

He recoiled from Lance's surprise and indignation, he shrank from his questionings and upbraidings. Why, indeed, should he lay himself open to so much pain and wretchedness, when in all human probability Madge was dead and he need never tell his secret ? If Lance considered him guilty now, how much more would he not blame him if he were to know the whole truth ? He could not speak it.

After a long pause he said, almost humbly :

" Will you go to Fairmead at once then, Lance ? "

" To-morrow, if you like."

" And will you let me know instantly all that you find out ? "

" Of course. I do not think, however, that we must build any hopes upon it. I will, however, see Miss Durham and I will see the clergyman of the parish, and the registers ; after that we can do nothing more. I will start to-morrow," he added, after a pause.

" Then I will go to London—they want me in Hill Street. I will stay a few days with my mother, where you can telegraph to me any news you learn."

Both felt this resolution to be a relief. After the storm of their late conversation, it would have been almost impossible to go on with their present life together, without some sort of break.

The next morning's post, however, brought a necessary change of plans—of Jack's plans at all events.

Lord Castlemere wrote to say that he was returning to Castle Regis for a few days, on his way to a flying visit to Hill Street. It was necessary that Jack should remain where he was, to welcome his uncle. After that, they might go on together to London.

Lance started from Northminster by an afternoon train and the carriage which took him to the station brought Lord Castlemere home.

His uncle arrived with evident trouble on his brow. On entering the house he looked about him for Lance Parker, and seemed somewhat relieved to hear that Lance had gone south for a few days.

"I am glad of it my boy—glad of it. The fact is, much as I like Parker personally, and highly as I value him as a friend for you, there are still critical times in every family history, when it is better to be alone."

"And is this a critical time, Uncle?"

"Yes, my boy, yes." And then Jack perceived that his uncle had something of importance to communicate to him.

Shortly after his arrival, he summoned his nephew into his study.

"Jack," he said with impressive solemnity, "I have something of a painful nature to communicate to you."

For a moment Jack's heart stood still, and the room seemed to go round with him. *Madge!* was the unspoken exclamation of his whole being. But it was not about Madge.

"My dear Jack, you know, I daresay, what a strong wish I have always entertained for your marriage with Agnes?"

"I am aware of it, Uncle."

"Your dear mother and myself have always been agreed upon this subject. I desired it years ago—and when in a mysterious manner your brief engagement to her came to an end, nobody regretted it more than I did, although in our grief about your father and our subsequent anxiety for your mother's health, the subject did not for the moment admit of much discussion. Of course, when you made up your differences with Agnes and offered your hand to her again no one rejoiced more sincerely than myself."

After this preamble Lord Castlemere became suddenly silent, and appeared from some cause or other to be considerably embarrassed. After some minutes, as Jack said nothing, he continued, although with evident effort.

'I believed her to be a good, pure-minded, honest-hearted

girl, devoted to yourself. I say I *believed* with intention, Jack, for to my deep sorrow I believe it no longer."

"My dear Uncle!" Jack sprang to his feet flushed and angry. "I cannot listen to this."

"Have patience with me, Jack," said Lord Castlemere, stretching out a hand to his nephew across the table. "I have been staying in a house where I became an unwilling listener to a conversation not intended for my ears. Miss Verinder was discussed—the ladies who mentioned her spoke of her with scorn and contempt, lightly—as no good woman should be spoken of—they said that she was as good as engaged for some years to a certain Major Hugh Lawley—with whom her name has been coupled with discredit—with dishonour!"

"I cannot allow you to say this!" cried Jack—"it is unworthy of you to have listened patiently to such cruel slander!"

"My dear boy, I honour you for your indignation, it is only what I anticipated—but you wrong me—I did not listen patiently—my patience left me when I heard these ladies pitying *you—you*, my heir!—for being deceived by such a woman! I burst from my retreat. I confronted them. I dared them to prove their wicked words against my future daughter-in-law, and they answered: 'Ask the Duchess of St. Graile—she will tell you the sort of character which your son's betrothed bears in the world.' Jack, the Duchess was my mother's bosom friend. She is the soul of honour, of goodness and of truth. I am on my way to London to ask her, and I will abide by her decision—for she is a woman who never listens to scandal. But of one thing I am determined—no woman whose name is not above the breath of suspicion, shall ever with my consent become your wife. I shall withdraw my approval of the marriage."

There were a few minutes of painful silence. Jack had walked away to the window, and stood looking out on the winter landscape with his back to the room. He felt that he was at a crisis of his fate, yet, even at that moment—so strangely are the trifles of life bound up with its sterner issues—he found time to notice that the sun was going down redly behind the bare woods in a pale and cloudless sky, and he said to himself, "it looks uncommonly like a frost coming on, with that sky, and a rising glass." Then he pulled himself together with an effort, and over his whole being there swept such a longing for Madge—for a breath of her sweetness and goodness—for the security with which a man turns to one whom he knows to be true and honest—as a refuge against all that is false and unhallowed—that for one moment it seemed to him that to take his uncle's words as a loophole of escape and ignobly to shuffle his own responsibilities upon his shoulders, would be, after all, the easiest and simplest course to pursue.

Suppose Lance should send him word that Madge yet lived!—then indeed, perforce, all must end between himself and Agnes—but on the other hand if, as most probable, it were true enough that she was dead, would not this fresh complication enable him to find yet another way, whereby he might escape from a distasteful union with a woman he neither loved nor respected? But although he did not love her—something held him back from condemning her unheard, and from giving her up from self-interested motives—he had behaved so badly to Agnes in the past, that honour, as well as duty, bade him strain every point in her favour in the present. He had strong notions of justice. To condemn a woman unheard upon a bare and unsupported slander was repugnant to his nature. As a man of the present generation, he was perhaps somewhat lacking in those high and punctilious old-world notions of woman's sanctity which men of his uncle's age and standing entertain. In Lord Castlemere's eyes the merest breath against a woman's honour was sufficient to tarnish it for ever. A woman who was not well spoken of by the whole world—even as his own mother had been—was to him unworthy altogether. But Jack knew very well that all these exalted standards have in these latter days considerably fallen from their first estate. A woman may be absolutely spotless in character, and yet be cruelly maligned and slandered by the senseless tongues of her idle fellow-women. Jack felt that he could not condemn her upon this. Agnes might be vain and selfish, her nature might be coarse and venial—yet there might still be nothing against her to preclude him from making her his wife. She had possibly never cared for himself, nay, she had very probably flirted with this other man—flirted injudiciously perhaps and without much reticence in her words or actions—but still for the mere folly of a girlish past, he had no right to cancel his obligations towards her. He had never supposed her to be perfect—to find that she was faulty was therefore no great shock to him. When he spoke at last to his uncle, he had made up his mind that he must stand by her.

“I think,” he said, “that you will find that the Duchess of St. Graile will not give much credence to this slanderous story—she knows the world too well. But whether she does so or no, it can make no difference in my relations to Miss Verinder. Nothing but absolute proof of her guilt, could justify me in breaking my engagement to her, and that, I imagine, these mischief-loving women who spoke ill of her, are scarcely prepared to supply. I have promised to marry Agnes, and I must keep my word. Her present conduct is, at all events, irreproachable. Into her past, I, of all men, have no right to pry. Towards me, at least, she has never behaved falsely.”

Yet what he had heard of her did not tend to increase his respect, nor yet to rekindle the feeble and flickering flame of his affection. The look-out of his future was indeed dark!

Lord Castlemere was deeply disturbed ; he secretly made up his mind to question his friend, the Duchess—yet he saw that it was too late to break off the match. The conviction also that it was mainly his own doing, and that between them, he and Lady Mary had made a mess of Jack's future, did not tend either to soothe his ruffled spirits.

“If only I had not been so keen about an heir !” he said to himself, with bitter self-reproach—“if only I had let the boy alone to choose a wife for himself——!”

Who knows how many thorny roads of life are not sprinkled by those hopeless words, “If only !”

“My boy,” he said presently, with a deep emotion, “you could not be dearer to me if you were my own son. I wanted to see you happy with a wife and children of your own before I died. I wanted, too, God forgive my pride ! to be certain that the old name would not become extinct, and now, perhaps, I am to be punished. I would give my right hand gladly, sooner than your married life should be unhappy—reflect I entreat you before it is too late. It would be better for you to marry a dairymaid, who was good, and true and honest, than to tie yourself to one whom you may discover, when it is too late, to be false and unworthy.”

Jack made no reply. He grasped his uncle's hand in silence, and, in the bitterness of a great remorse, he thought of Madge !

The door opened ; the footman brought in the evening letters upon a silver tray.

There was a letter from Agnes amongst them—a letter, trivial as it was, which filled him with rage. He crushed it up in his hand with an angry hopelessness, and thrust it deep down into his pocket.

On the top of what they had been speaking of, there was a horrible bathos about that letter.

Her honour, her good name, her future, had hung in the balance, whilst Agnes wrote, with a very passion of earnestness, about a coveted jewel !

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE PEARL NECKLACE.

“Now will I show myself to have more of the serpent than the dove ; that is, more knave than fool.”

—CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE.

IN the strong room at Castle Regis, together with the title deeds of the estates, the will of the present Lord, and sundry other interesting family papers, there was a necklace, which, ~~from time immemorial had been~~ was regarded with an almost

superstitious veneration, by many generations of the Castlemere family.

It consisted of three rows of oriental pearls, of large size and of extreme beauty, fastened together by an antique gold clasp, in which was set one huge and magnificent ruby of absolutely priceless value.

This necklace had been worn, in turn, by many successive Ladies Castlemere. In the picture gallery it figured about the necks of the wives of the Lords of Castlemere. It was painted in a certain very beautiful and well authenticated portrait by Vandyke, and reappeared again in a no less valuable picture by Gainsborough.

How the necklace came into the family was never satisfactorily accounted for, although it was said to have been brought from the East at the time of the second Crusade ; but there existed a very ancient tradition concerning it, to the effect that if it were ever worn, even for a moment, by any other save by the reigning Lady Castlemere, sundry disasters and calamities would inevitably befall the persons and estates of the Castlemeres.

This prophecy, in well nigh illegible old characters traced upon a parchment that was yellow with age, was kept in the same case with the jewel amongst the rest of the family archives, and was respected and devoutly believed in, even in these latter days of practical and common-sense incredulity. During the life of the present Lord, the necklace, as he was unmarried, had never been worn, but was kept immured in its strong case, whence it was occasionally taken to be exhibited to some visitor at the Castle who might have expressed any interest in it, and any desire to behold it.

In this manner it came not unnaturally to be shown to Agnes Verinder ; in fact, Lord Castlemere himself had taken her up into the strong room, and had lifted it out of its case in order to display it to her.

She was allowed to take it into her hands and to admire it to her heart's content, but not to clasp it about her neck, or even to twist it about her wrist, lest, as he told her smilingly, evil should therefrom accrue to her future husband's property.

There are many old English families in which heirlooms, with similar strange traditions attached to them, are still religiously preserved, whilst the conditions under which they are held are most rigidly maintained, and in many cases firmly believed in, in spite both of reason and of common sense, and of the rapid onward march of nineteenth century science and intelligence.

The fact of the matter being that a belief in the supernatural is so deeply implanted in the human mind—so essentially an instinct of our nature—that not all the blazing lights of science and of education have been able wholly to

exterminate it from our innermost hearts. It lurks in hidden corners, or springs up again and again in strange and unforeseen places, often where we should least have expected to come across it. So that there arises, at length, in the minds of those who are wise, a doubt as to whether this inherent element of man's being can ever be entirely blotted out from amongst us ; whether indeed it may not be undesirable to smother it ; and whether, above all, there are not things in Heaven and in Earth which man's philosophy and man's intellect will never be able fully to understand and to account for.

In some persons, however, this subtle sense of a superstitious veneration seems certainly to be altogether left out. These are the materialists of the world, to whom life and its issues is nothing but a well poised machine of levers and of cog wheels, and to whom the gratification of the senses, no less than that of the mental faculties, are the only rational realities of existence.

In such minds, the imaginative and artistic faculties have little or no place, and naturally the incomprehensible and the unknown also, only bring to them a sense of impatience and of irritation.

Agnes Verinder, for instance, regarded the venerable traditions of the Castlemere necklace with the utmost scorn and contempt.

She could not understand how sensible persons like Lord Castlemere, Lady Mary and Jack, could possibly have any respect for such a ridiculous old story, and she was angry with the folly, as she considered it, which stood betwixt her and the gratification of her wishes.

She loved jewellery with all the passion of a vain and covetous nature, and when Lord Castlemere showed the treasure to her, she was loud in her expressions of admiration of the beautiful necklace, with its milk-white rows of exquisite pearls and the flashing fire of its monster ruby. Moreover, she longed, with her whole soul, to possess it for her own.

Afterwards, in talking of it to Jack, she expressed to him in strong language her great desire to wear it, and he had laughingly said to her :

“ And so you will, my dear, one of these days, when the dear old man is gone to his rest, and you have become Lady Castlemere ; but I hope you won't be able to wear it yet awhile.”

“ Of course, I don't want your uncle to die,” she had answered, “ but I do think it foolish to keep up that stupid superstition ! What possible difference could it make to him or to anybody if I were to wear it as soon as I am married ? ”

"Stupid or no, it is a superstition which every Lord of Castlemere has religiously adhered to, and which my uncle would never think of setting aside. You will have to wait for your necklace, Agnes, until you are the reigning queen, and, as the saying is, to 'rough it' on my grandmother's diamonds in the meantime!"

No more had been said between them on the subject at the time. But Agnes often went up into the picture gallery whilst she was staying at Castle Regis, in order to feast her eyes upon the different family portraits in which the wonderful necklace was reproduced; and there arose in her ill-governed mind a strong and greedy longing to possess this priceless treasure now that she was in the prime of her womanly beauty; and she experienced a dull anger at the folly of keeping it from her, under lock and key, for perhaps another ten or twelve years, when, maybe, the beautiful throat and bosom, which would so well set it off to-day, should have lost something perhaps of its present fairness.

With the perversity of human nature, the mere fact that this jewel was denied to her made her desire to possess it the greater. Not all the beauty of the family diamonds, which were to be purposely re-set for her, nor the many lovely modern trinkets which her friends and relations were about to present to her, could suffice to console her for the lack of this one thing which she was forbidden to possess.

It was therefore no wonder, perhaps, that Jack was seriously annoyed to receive a long letter from her, in which, with the most passionate entreaties and prayers, she implored him to move his uncle's resolution so that she might be permitted to wear the famous pearl necklace—at least on her wedding day.

She represented to him that her toilette would be incomplete without it, that the descriptions of her costume in the Society papers would be lacking in their crowning feature, that all her friends thought her a fool not to get hold of it—and that her own heart was set upon it more than anything else on earth.

She adjured him by his affection and his troth—things she had cared little about hitherto—not to deny to her this one great wish of her soul, and to do his utmost to persuade his uncle to allow her to wear it.

"He will do anything on earth for you, Jack," she wrote; "so I know that if you really put your whole mind to it that you will be able to get it for me."

Jack read all this again for the second time in the train as he and his uncle were journeying Londonwards the following day.

There was a slight frown upon his forehead as he scanned the closely-written pages—her elaborate arguments failed

entirely to move him, and when he had finished the letter he glanced up at his uncle, who was sitting opposite to him.

Lord Castlemere had been reading the paper, but he had laid it aside now, and to Jack's fancy he looked worried and anxious. Agnes could not have pitched upon a worse moment in which to urge an unpalatable request upon him. The old man's mind was full of suspicions and of doubts about her, his good opinion of her had been rudely shaken, and he was beginning to realise that, in spite of his friendship for Sir Herbert and his desire to unite the Deep-Deane acres to the Castle Regis estates, he had possibly made a great mistake in fostering the marriage of his dearly-loved nephew—his dear Mary's boy—with this handsome but, perhaps, unprincipled heiress. He was one of those men whose faith in others remains blind and unreasoning, until once it has been shaken, but who then never will believe in them at all any more. Agnes had fallen from her pinnacle ; she might not indeed be all that he feared, but, at any rate, her name had been lightly spoken of, and for that reason alone she was no longer worthy to be Jack's wife, or the mother of Jack's son.

He might be harsh, unjust even, in his judgments—but that was how he regarded the matter. He could not blind himself to the fact that Jack was possibly in honour bound to marry her all the same ; but the marriage no longer gave him any pleasure to contemplate, and if any way could even now, at the eleventh hour, be found, whereby his nephew might creditably withdraw from it, Lord Castlemere would be unfeignedly glad of it.

Jack, watching that pucker of trouble upon his uncle's forehead, folded up the letter again and returned it to his pocket. He would not add to the old man's worries, or increase his ill-opinion of Agnes by mentioning the subject to him at all. He knew that he would never grant her request, and to be asked such a thing would only anger him.

Privately, Jack thought that the mere fact of her suggesting it, even to himself, was in the worst possible taste.

He would tell her when he saw her that it was impossible, and that she must think of it no more.

Then Lord Castlemere turned round to him and, more for the sake of avoiding any uncomfortable allusion to Agnes than for any interest he took in the subject, asked him if his mother had told him about the little protégé she had picked up in the streets.

“She did tell me of it in her last letter—some child that was nearly run over, I think she said, and that she carried home with her. Has she mentioned it again to you, uncle ?”

“Yes—the boy is still with her. She has not found his parents yet. She talks of keeping him.”

"Of keeping him altogether ! What on earth will she do with him ?"

"My dear boy, that is your mother's affair ! I never, as you know, thwart any of her whims and fancies——"

"But surely the care of a child, at her age, and with her delicate health, will be too much for her ! How old is the brat ?"

"About three, I think she says, and a charming little boy."

"Still—to adopt a beggar child, of whom she knows nothing, seems a terrible risk. It will entail a great deal of expense upon her, and who can tell, moreover, what vices may not be born in him, and what seeds of evil may not develope and flourish by-and-bye ? He may bring her an infinity of future trouble !"

Lord Castlemere only shrugged his shoulders, and laughed slightly.

"Ah, that is all very well for you and I, Jack !—but do you suppose a woman like your mother is likely to listen to arguments of that kind, when a helpless baby is thrown by chance into her arms ? Good women, Jack, don't reason ; they follow their hearts, and their hearts don't very often lead them far wrong. It is a good thing for this world, Jack, that the women aren't all as hard and calculating and practical as we men are—it's just that irresponsible, soft-hearted foolishness—those tender, reasonless impulses in them, which doubtless are God-given and not of earth, which make them of such infinite value to the grosser-fibred men to whom they belong." And then he sighed and looked away, for it came into his mind all at once, that possibly Jack's experience of such women as he was thinking of would never go beyond his own mother—his wife for certain would not be one of them !

"I shall not interfere with your mother's present fancy, my boy," he resumed presently. "She is bound to be right in what she is doing, and she is going to lose you, so why should we grudge her something fresh to love ? She is clever too—one can trust her not to do anything inconsiderately. I don't suppose the baby will turn out a thief or a murderer ; she must see good in him already, or she wouldn't have taken to him."

When they reached the Midland Terminus, the uncle and nephew separated—Lord Castlemere had bachelor quarters near Pall Mall, which he had always kept for many years past, and to which he preferred to go, whilst Jack went to Hill Street to his mother's.

It was dark when he got to the house. The train was somewhat late, and the ladies had waited dinner for him. He rushed up to his room to change his attire with only a passing greeting to them both upon the staircase.

When he found himself sitting opposite to his betrothed at

the dinner-table, he could not help being struck anew with her wonderful beauty. Agnes was dressed in a flowing tea-gown of a deep, tawny, orange colour, with knots of lurid red amongst its folds. There was something oddly weird and fantastic about this garment—under the lamp-light, as she stooped forward to speak to him, it seemed to be touched here and there with flecks of living flame, and her dark hair and splendid eyes stood out with an almost unearthly blackness in contrast with the strange, vivid colours. Always afterwards, in recalling that evening, he thought of her, clad from throat to feet in the sheen of that wonderful mixture of red and orange hues.

There was a glitter of excitement in Miss Verinder's eyes to-night ; she was glad to see him, life with Lady Mary had been decorously dull, and she was somewhat tired of pretending to be good and amiable—moreover, just of late, she was conscious of having failed a little with her future mother-in-law. The episode of the child had annoyed her, the child himself did not attract her, and she was aware that Lady Mary considered her unlovable and unwomanly in the attitude she had at first taken up about him. She had endeavoured to counteract this unfavourable impression, by an elaborate after-pretence of sympathy and interest—but it was only pretence, and Lady Mary had seen through it. For the first time Jack's mother had her doubts about her—and Agnes felt out of touch with her.

Jack's arrival was a godsend to her, over Jack she flattered herself that her ascendancy was still absolute. She could do what she liked with him, twist him round her fingers. She meant to get that necklace out of him for her wedding-day, by fair means if possible—but, if not, then by foul means !

If Jack had only known what there was lying in the pocket of that tawny orange gown, or if he had only been there to see his beautiful Agnes's face as she had unlocked her dressing-case that evening, and had taken from its secret drawer a paper that had lain it in safely for more than four whole years ! Would he have eaten his dinner with so good an appetite ? Would his eyes have rested so admiringly and approvingly upon her, as she bent smilingly to him across the flower-decked table-cloth ? And would he have said to himself as he watched her, with a reversion of feeling in her favour :

“ After all, I have wronged her in my heart, and my uncle has done her an injustice ! She may be foolish and vain, but she cannot be all bad, with that face and that smile, and those eyes ! ”

For the reigning influence of the hour was, as of old, always paramount with Jack, and he was as prone as ever to be turned from his preconceived judgments and decisions

by the magnetic strength of everyday associations which affected his heart rather than his head.

After dinner, Lady Mary went upstairs to see her adopted boy in his nursery, and as Jack held open the door for her, he laughingly asked if he might be allowed to inspect "the new baby."

"To-morrow you shall see him, my dear, not to-night, if he is awake he might be frightened at a stranger. You and Agnes must have plenty to talk about, I shall leave you together."

This was the opportunity for which Agnes had been waiting. As soon as the door had closed upon the older woman, Miss Verinder cried eagerly: "Well, Jack, what success?"

She had thrown herself into a low armchair drawn straight up in front of the hearthrug, her head was tilted back upon scarlet cushions of Eastern embroidery, her beautiful face was upturned towards him as he stood above her, leaning against the mantelpiece. "A symphony in red and orange" a modern painter would have called her. Somehow, all at once, in spite of her glorious beauty, the idea that she resembled a wild animal began to thrust itself into his mind. Was there not something panther-like about her? Something cruel and stealthy and cunning! There were gleams of hidden fire in her splendid eyes, and the sneer of a treacherous smile upon the carmine of her lips.

"What success?" she repeated impatiently, seeing that he only looked at her and did not answer.

Now, of course, Jack knew perfectly well what she meant, but, as he was an invertebrate animal—*i.e.*, a man deficient in moral pluck, he replied feebly enough:

"Oh—how do you mean? What kind of success?"

She tapped her foot impatiently upon the carpet.

"Pray don't pretend ignorance, Jack, it's so stupid! You know that I am alluding to the necklace."

"The pearl necklace?" repeated Jack uncomfortably, as though particularizing its nature helped him somehow out of his difficulty. Miss Verinder contemptuously disregarded the subterfuge.

"What does your uncle say? have you gained him over? will he let me have it?"

It was astonishing how easy it had seemed to him in the train and how difficult it was now! Would she spring at him? Would she show her claws and her teeth, his beautiful panther? How ludicrously the horrible simile kept on twisting itself into the situation! If a veritable wild animal had arisen snarling from the luminous red gold of her draperies and had confronted him with its fierce and wicked face, Jack felt he would scarcely have been surprised!

There was a brief silence. Jack held out his patent leather pumps deliberately one after the other to the fire, with his face turned away from her.

"The fact is," he said at length, "I don't know what my uncle says or thinks, because I have not asked him."

"Not asked him? What, not after my letter? After the way in which I entreated you to do so?"

"No. There was no need to ask him. He would never be induced to grant you such a thing."

The ice once broken he found it much easier to go on, his courage and his strength came back to him.

"*You* could make him grant my request if you chose," she answered in a low steady voice, "there is nothing Lord Castlemere will not do for you, nothing on earth!"

"It is an improper request," cried Jack with some anger. "You have no business to make it. I shall not be your mouthpiece. Ask him yourself and see what he will say."

"Of course that is ridiculous! he would never do it for me, although he might very probably for you. Look here, Jack—don't be such a coward—do this thing for my sake. I have set my heart upon it. Surely you cannot deny me so trifling a thing when I ask it of you!" She rose from her seat and wound her hands round his arm, leaning against him with a little caressing *abandon* in her attitude; her voice was gentle and conciliatory, and her eyes were full of tenderness. She was giving him his last chance. "It is not too late, Jack, go and see him to-morrow morning and ask him."

Jack shook her off angrily and impatiently.

"I will not, once for all! You have no business to ask for that necklace, you know what he as well as I think about it, and in what light we regard it. Do you suppose that to gratify the mere whim of a vain and foolish woman we should for one moment consent to trample upon all that our forefathers have held sacred? Let me hear no more of this, Agnes. I cannot go with you in this matter, and I do not intend to speak of it to my uncle."

Her colour rose, her face grew angry and rigid whilst he spoke. Her hand slipped swiftly into the pocket of her dress and grasped the hidden paper convulsively.

"You will not? that is your answer? Think again, Jack. I assure you, you will be sorry for it. It will be the worse for you if you do not."

"I do not know what you mean, nor with what you are threatening me; but if I thought about it from now till Doomsday, I should still give you the same answer. I shall not mention the necklace to my uncle."

He tossed away the hand that lay upon his arm, and flung himself down into a chair, gnawing angrily at the corner of his moustache.

Agnes stood for a second where he had left her, looking at him. She was pale now, and there was a certain concentration in her eyes and in the lines of her mouth which, as

he did not lift his head, he could not see. Slowly she drew forth the letter out of the folds of her orange draperies, and held it in both hands.

"Then, my friend," she said slowly and deliberately, "I am afraid I must make you."

He made a gesture of contempt and anger.

"Do you recognize this letter, Jack?" she said, and thrust the paper she held suddenly towards him, taking care not to loosen her hold upon it.

Jack's eyes fell upon it—vaguely at first, but after a second with a startled eagerness—he recognized his own handwriting, his own words, the words in which he had striven to break the ice of their coming parting to his new-made wife, and had entreated her to meet him on the morrow at Fairley Junction! The lines danced before his eyes, the room seemed to go round with him, he tried to snatch the letter from her hands, but she was too quick for him, and whisked it away behind her back, with a short peal of mocking laughter.

He sprang to his feet and faced her furiously.

"How did you get that letter? how did you get it?—by God, if you don't speak the truth I will kill you!"

"My dear Jack, pray calm yourself—"

"Speak at once!" he repeated wildly.

"Give me time to speak then! You sent me the letter yourself!"

"I sent it you?—it is a lie!"

"Fie! what an uncivil word to a lady! but it is not a lie but the truth. You posted the letter I suppose, and the postman delivered it duly in Hans Place. See, here is the envelope, which you are at liberty to examine as much as you please."

He took it from her hand and looked at it bewilderedly, his memory was a chaos, he passed his hand vaguely over his head—it was his own handwriting—he had written that address—how did that letter get into it? he could remember nothing! Only out of the darkness of his mind one thing awoke with a startling reality.

"That letter was not intended for you."

"I am quite aware of it, Jack."

"And yet you kept it—you have kept it all this time!"

"Certainly. Wherefore should I not keep it?"

"And—the other letter—the letter that was meant for you?—where did that go?"

She laughed. A cruel little laugh of mockery.

"Oh—that went I imagine to the lady to whom you were anxious to make a 'regular allowance.' It is very simple, Jack! a case of wrong envelopes! It happens oftener in this world than you may suppose, it was not at all an original mistake my poor boy, it has been done hundreds of times. Only not always with such amusing results!"

He turned away from her with a groan.

What had he written in that other letter, which his Madge must have received? the letter which, oh, wretched man that he was! must have broken her heart!

He could not recall the cruel words, yet he remembered the gist of it well enough—well enough! It might well indeed have killed her.

“Now then, Jack my dear, be sensible,” said the cool voice of his betrothed breaking in upon the agony of his miserable remorse. “If you do not exert your influence to get me that necklace, I am going to lay that letter before your good uncle, who has so high an opinion of you, and your holy-minded mother who believes you to be a saint upon earth! I don’t think they will appreciate it, either of them!”

“You are a devil, Agnes!”

“Pray spare me your bad language. It is in bad taste, and it will not make me break off my engagement to you, because it suits me to marry you. I cannot, you see, be thrown over a *second* time! so don’t let us have any hard words. I am sure you will be sensible. You would not care for that little past episode to become known to your people?”

“Do your worst,” he answered gloomily. “You cannot injure the dead.”

He sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands.

Agnes stood for a moment watching him with a curious smile of triumph.

“I shall give you till to-morrow to think it over,” she said presently. “I am quite willing to meet you half way and to be amiable. If you do as I wish, we can easily burn this letter together to-morrow, and then we shall not injure either the living or—*the dead*, as you say!”

There was a swish of satin draperies as they swept across the carpet, the soft closing of a door—and he was alone.

CHAPTER XXXIV

OLD MISS DURHAM REPENTS.

“Confess yourself to Heaven,
Repent what’s past; avoid what is to come.”

—SHAKESPEARE.—*Hamlet*.

THE clanging peal of the door bell rang through the echoing silence of the great, empty house.

Miss Durham laid down her book and listened attentively. She was altered and aged, she had had a slight stroke of paralysis and had almost entirely lost the use of her legs. Her face had grown thin and drawn, and waxen yellow in its hue, but the keen hawk eyes were as full of life as ever, and both sight and hearing were undimmed; her hair too was but faintly streaked with grey, and was glossy and ~~plentiful~~ woman.

Presently she heard the sound of voices outside in the hall. Wilson's voice, which she recognised, and another—a man's voice—which was not the Vicar's. No other male visitor came to the house in the afternoon. Who could it be?

There seemed to be some argument or discussion going on, and whatever it was there was no end to it. The tones of Wilson's voice became raised and angry.

Miss Durham grew not only curious but impatient. She struck her hand sharply on the brass hand-bell by her side on the table. Instantly Wilson appeared at the open door.

"What is going on? Who is out there?" demanded his mistress imperiously.

"It's one of them gentlemen, ma'am, the one as came some little time back."

"One of *those*? you mean those that were here four summers ago?" she enquired with a sudden eagerness, leaning forward in her chair.

"Yes, ma'am. Most impudent I call it, 'e won't take an answer and go. I've told 'im as you see no visitors now of any kind, but 'e won't budge an inch. Don't be afraid, ma'am, I've left James at the door with strict orders not to let him cross the thres'old save hover 'is dead body."

"Nonsense! let the man in. I will see him."

Wilson fell back a step, he could scarcely believe his ears.

"You wish to see him, ma'am?" he repeated blankly.

"Certainly. Don't you hear me, you fool? Go and show the gentleman in."

Wilson retired sullenly. In a moment he returned, and flinging wide the door announced in a sepulchral voice:

"Mr. Lancelot Parker."

Old Miss Durham fixed her gold-rimmed spectacles upon her nose and inspected the intruder with a scrutinizing gaze. She did not shake hands with him nor offer him a seat.

Lance was red and hot, and felt very uncomfortable. But there was a bull-dog determination about him too. He stuck his eyeglass into his eye, and nothing daunted stared back again at the old lady.

"You wish to see me, sir, I understand?"

"Yes, madam. I am obliged to you for granting me an interview."

"What do you desire of me?"

"I simply desire to ask you a question, to which I am sure you will kindly give me an answer."

"I've hanwered hall 'is questions halready," quoth Wilson gruffly by the doorway, "I've told 'im hover and hover again but 'e won't take a hanwer."

"I have reason to believe that your servant is not speaking the truth to me, and that he did not speak the truth to me a few weeks ago when I was here before. And that is why,

madam, I am intruding upon your privacy in order to learn what I desire to know from your own lips."

"Ask your question young man, and I will answer you."

"Is your niece, Miss Margaret Durham, dead?"

For a moment the old woman's face worked as though with secret emotion. But controlling herself with an effort, she answered in a cold, matter-of-fact voice :

"Certainly she is dead. She died last summer of malignant typhus fever, and lies buried in Fairley Church-yard, where you may see the cross erected to her memory."

"There—didn't I tell ye so?" cried Wilson exultingly by the door.

Lance cast a swift glance of rage and contempt behind him, and continued unmoved :

"Then are *both* your nieces dead, madam?"

"Both? certainly not! My elder niece died. I have no reason to suppose that my great-niece, Madge, is not alive."

Lance drew a long breath. "Then by what right, Madam, does your butler say that she is dead?"

"I said nothing of the sort, sir," cried Wilson excitedly. "You hasked for Miss Margaret, and I told you Miss Margaret was dead."

"You told me not five minutes ago that *both* the Miss Margarets were dead."

"Wilson!" cried the old lady sharply. "How dared you utter such a lie? What business had you to say such a thing?"

"Why, you told me yourself, ma'am, years ago, if hever heither of these two young gents was to come hasking at the door for Miss Madge, I was to say she was dead, it was your own horders ma'am."

"Leave the room, Wilson, instantly," cried the old woman furiously, ill-pleased at having her own orders brought up against her. She pointed, with a withered yellow finger, to the door.

Wilson began a remonstrance.

"Leave the room, you blockhead!" shouted the old lady.

"I think you had better go," said Lance, and as he spoke he made one step towards the man, and there was something in his face which caused Wilson to vanish with a precipitation which was somewhat comical.

Lance came back smiling grimly. Miss Durham was still trembling with rage.

"Sit down, sir," she said to him with more affability than she had yet displayed, motioning him with her hand to a chair. He bowed and obeyed her.

"I am truly rejoiced, Miss Durham, to learn that I was misinformed about your great-niece, Miss Madge, and that she is still alive. Since this is the case, would it be too much if I were to ask to be allowed to see her?"

Miss Durham glanced at him keenly.

"It would be too much—far too much—even if it were in my power to grant so audacious a request. But, unfortunately it is not in my power. Madge is not here."

"Not here? Where is she, then?"

For the first time he became aware of a subtle change in her expression. She was no longer imperious and autocratic. She leant forward, with both wrinkled hands upon her knees, and looked at him enquiringly—almost wistfully.

"That is what I had hoped you had come to tell me—Mr.—Mr.—Parker, was it? Oh, I thought it was something else. But I forgot the name, it is so long ago. Never mind! Can you tell me nothing of her?"

"I, madam? How should I know where your niece is?"

"Yet, surely it was to *you* she must have gone! Who else should she have gone to—poor, deluded girl?"

"I know nothing of her—nothing. I have been abroad."

She nodded her head. "Yes, yes, I remember," she murmured. Then, aloud, and fixing upon him a look of anxious enquiry, "What can have become of her? After all, she was my flesh and blood. I did not mean to drive her to that. I meant to do the best for her. And now she haunts me night and day. It is lonely without her in this great house—very lonely. I have no one but Wilson and the other servants to speak to and I have been ill since she left, and Wilson grows domineering and insolent. Hush!" and she laid her finger on her lips and glanced nervously towards the door. "He will be listening, I make no doubt. Go and see—step softly, Mr. Parker—he often listens."

Lance crept across the room, turned the door handle softly, and was just in time to see Wilson's retreating form scuffling away down the passage.

"I thought so. Bring your chair closer to me, so that I can speak in a low voice, then he won't be able to hear us. He is deaf, that is a comfort," she added, with a malicious chuckle. "Very deaf, thank God! Deafer than I am."

A sort of pity for the helpless old woman, bereft of her natural protectors, and left to the mercy of this truculent old man-servant, arose within him. He ought to have been angry with her for her cruelty to Madge, but he could not be angry. She was so old—so very old, and she seemed sorry, too, and all the barriers of her stern self-sufficiency seemed breaking down under the weight of her age and infirmity. One forgives so much to the old.

His voice was quite gentle and kind when he spoke again.

"Am I to understand, then, Miss Durham, that Madge ran away from home?"

She sighed and nodded three or four times in assent. The recollection seemed to distress her.

"Can you not imagine at all where she may have gone? Had she any friends in London?"

"Ah! you think she went to London, then?" she asked quickly.

"Yes, because—well, I will be open with you, Miss Durham. When I returned to England last summer, I found at my Club a letter from your niece, which, alas, was a month old, asking me to meet her at Paddington Station. That is what makes me conclude that it was to London that she went."

Miss Durham settled her spectacles more firmly upon her nose and regarded him attentively.

"So, she did do her best to join you?" she said slowly, and then, after a pause, during which she continued to scrutinize him narrowly, she added, almost involuntarily, "You are not handsome. I wonder what on earth the poor, silly child saw in you?"

Lance coloured furiously up to the roots of his hair.

"I—I don't suppose—she—looked at me particularly," he stammered.

"Umph!" grunted the old lady, shortly and derisively. Then, facing him with a certain dignity, she continued:

"Look here, Mr.—Mr.—Parker. We had better understand one another. Between us this poor child of mine has suffered badly. I don't say I am not to blame. I am a woman of strong prejudices and opinions, and I trained up both my nieces after my own ideal of what women should be. I believe, and nothing in my experience has yet proved to me that I am wrong, that men only bring trouble and sorrow and shame into women's lives, and I brought up my nieces to believe in it too. I taught them to look forward, not to miserable marriages as the end of their existence, but to the peace and security of a self-sufficient single life. Well, I believe to this hour that I am right, and that women are safer and happier without a man in their lives. But there are, I am aware, many women to whom folly is more attractive than wisdom, and the glamour of a man's deceitful words more fascinating than wholesome maxims from an older woman's lips. My poor Madge—pretty in face and weak and foolish in character—was doubtless one of these. Had I been awake to the fact sooner, I might have seen that I was making a mistake with her, and that it would have been better to let her have her own way and marry, even to misery, than to fall into the slough of shame and despair in which she has utterly destroyed herself—"

"Miss Durham!" cried Lance. "What can you mean? Those are cruel and wicked words. I entreat you to unsay them! There can be no shame upon her—none—none!"

"Well, I honour you, sir, for your candour in owning, at all events, that the shame is far less deserved by the girl who

sacrifices herself by her weakness and her love, than by the deliberate destroyer of her happiness, who betrays her first and then meanly deserts her. To such a one, sir, it were well, indeed, to apply the hardest words which the English language can supply of disgrace and opprobrium."

She remained looking at him fiercely and angrily.

Lance, with his ruddy countenance paled to a sickly yellow, stared at her back with horror and dismay. What terrible thing was it that this old woman was saying to him? What awful secret concerning her who was, to him, the incarnation of goodness in woman, was she about to reveal to him? He was spellbound. He could not utter a word.

"Look here, Mr. Parker," continued the old woman with determination. "No wonder you look agitated and guilty. You *are* guilty. I know your secret. You ruined my greatniece. Are you prepared to make amends to her—to find her wherever she may be, and to marry her as soon as you find her?"

"I ruin your niece!" cried Lance, with indignation. "I be guilty of so foul a crime! As there is a God above us, it is a lie! and I will stake my soul upon the spotless purity and innocence of the woman your wicked words so foully malign."

He stood before her, with anger blazing in his eyes; he was angry with that righteous wrath which becomes a man well, and before which slanderous tongues are crushed and silenced into ignominious fear. But Miss Durham was neither crushed nor silenced, nor yet was she afraid.

"You cannot deny that you loved her," she persisted.

"I do not deny it. I loved her then—I love her now. If I find her I will certainly marry her, if she will have me—that very day—that very hour. But to dare to tell me that I betrayed or deceived her—that she, who is an angel of goodness, has ever fallen from her innocence and purity—that is what no living soul shall utter in my presence! It is only because you are a woman, and old, that you have the courage to say such wicked and lying words of her."

Yet she did not seem frightened nor abashed by his words, only somewhat surprised and puzzled.

"And yet," she said, after a minute, and her voice was cool and collected, "and yet how can you possibly deny it—when there is the child?"

There was a moment of absolute silence. The old lady sat bolt upright in her chair with a little smile of triumph upon her thin, pale lips, and Lance stared at her dully and bewilderedly. The flush of anger had faded from his face—there seemed to arise a strange mist about him, the objects in the room, the furniture around the table, the books in the shelves, the pictures on the walls, became all blotted together into a chaotic jumble. Only, although he could not see, he seemed to hear, with a horrible distinctness. The ticking of

the clock, the fall of a coal into the fender, the twittering of a canary in its cage in the window, all pierced through his brain with something akin to physical pain.

“The child!” he repeated at last, dully and vacantly, then after a long pause, “whose child?”

“Well, yours, I presume, Mr. Parker.”

A strong shudder shook him.

“God forbid!” he cried. “God forbid that such a thing should be said of me!” and then all at once he awoke from his lethargy; the scales fell from his eyes, and the *truth*, in letters of flame, seemed to stand out of the darkness in giant characters before him.

The child, of course, was Jack’s! But simultaneously with the thought an equally strong conviction forced itself upon him. With all the strength of an actual revelation, he was certain that Jack was incapable of such foul dishonour towards an innocent girl who loved him and trusted in him.

Jack had been weak and foolish, no doubt, misguided evidently, and utterly wanting in true courage and determination, but so vile a criminal as this old woman believed to exist—no, never, never! Perish the thought in shame and confusion! Jack would be Jack no longer, and truth and goodness have ceased to exist ere such a thing could be true! And then the secret, that secret which his friend had guarded so long, and kept from him so religiously and with such mistaken reserve, flashed itself suddenly into his soul with irresistible force.

Madge must have been married to him secretly. She must have been his wife! *Have been!* Why, if she lived now, she was his wife still—at this very moment! This other marriage must be stopped—stopped at once—immediately! There was no time to be lost.

He sprang to his feet in wild and uncontrollable emotion. The utter destruction of his own hopes and secret aspirations scarcely caused him any pain, so great was his eagerness to set right this great and terrible wrong that was about to be done to her he loved.

“I must go,” he said agitatedly, holding out his hand to the old lady. “I must go at once, there is no time to lose.”

“Go? Go!” repeated the old lady mockingly, “what, with all this history unexplained? No, no, Mr. Parker, you owe it to me to give me some explanation of the past, some promise, at least, for the future.”

She was right. He sat down again. “I beg your pardon, Miss Durham, I will give you every explanation in my power. But you are under a great mistake. Both I and my friend loved your niece, but I loved her in vain; it was my friend, Mr. Ludlow, who won her; he was, no, doubt, secretly married to her.”

"Ludlow," she repeated, half to herself. "Yes, now I remember, it was *Ludlow*—that was the name! Jack Ludlow!" Then aloud she asked, "What makes you say that? Why should you suppose that they were married?"

"Because I know my friend better than you appear to know your niece. If there is a child, it is because they were married. Jack Ludlow is a gentleman, not only by birth and education, but to the very heart; he is absolutely incapable of such baseness and dishonour as you have imagined. I will stake my soul upon it that Madge is his wife!"

"Why, then, did he desert her?"

"Why? Miss Durham, ask your own conscience. Was it not because you—you yourself wrote and told him that she died four years ago—and he was foolish enough to believe you? No doubt, in your narrow wisdom, you thought to divide them for ever, and see what an evil thing you have done to your own flesh and blood."

She had nothing to say. She saw that he knew what she had done and she had no force left to deny it.

A few weak tears; the first, perhaps, that mortal man had ever seen shed by that hard old woman, gushed from her eyes. She fell back wailingly upon her original grievance.

"If only we knew where to find her, all might yet be well," she whined plaintively.

"We will find her—Jack and I, and all shall be well yet," he answered with determination. "If she is alive we will find her. She had the child with her?"

"Yes, she took him. She was afraid I should part her from him." She bowed her head and was afraid to look at him.

Lance glanced at her bitterly and sternly. Piece by piece the miserable story seemed to fit itself together at last.

"Had she any money with her?"

"A few pounds—five I had given her, and a little money perhaps of her own—about seven in all, I daresay."

"Seven pounds, on which to support herself and a child for four or five months! My God, what can have become of them?" he groaned. "They may both be dead of starvation by this time! Miss Durham, do you know that you are a very wicked woman? You have not long to live, you had better repent of your sins and make your peace with God before you die."

A deathly yellow pallor overspread her wrinkled face; for the first time there was terror and remorse in her eyes.

She clasped her withered hands tremblingly together.

"I know, I know," she cried brokenly. "Don't you think that I have thought of it all, as I have sat here alone day after day, week after week? Do you suppose that I am not sorry for what I have done, when, night after night, she—that other dear Margaret who is in Heaven, comes and stands

with her white dead face by my bedside and says to me, 'What have you done with Madge—what have you done with Madge?' Oh, you think because I am old and hard that I have ceased to feel or to suffer, that I don't know what remorse is. Stay, then—I will show you that I repent ; I will make amends—I will do my best, all that I can," her voice grew weak and broken, her words came with difficulty and in rasping sobs from her throat. She pointed with one hand to a secretaire behind her, fumbling in her velvet bag with the other. "The will—give me the will," she gasped ; "the top drawer, here, take the key, this one—don't make a noise, he will hear—that is it, the long blue envelope and another one at the back—quite at the back there, that is it, bring them here, quick—quick !"

Lance obeyed her directions swiftly and in silence. All at once he became alive to the vital importance of this moment. He was almost as excited as she was as he laid the two blue envelopes before her on the table. She waved her arm wildly towards the door ; he understood her meaning and went quickly across the room and locked it. By this time the old woman was almost incapable of speech. She took from its envelope a long and elaborate document and thrust it into his hands. "He made me write it—read it."

It was a will, correctly and elaborately drawn up, with all the necessary formulæ, properly signed and witnessed, evidently the work of a lawyer, probably, from the handwriting, of some low country attorney of little education or breeding. Skimming through it quickly, Lance perceived, to his horror, that everything—house, land, money, pictures, furniture, plate and jewels—was indiscriminately left to one person—to "My faithful servant, Joseph Wilson."

He looked up from it with indignation. "You cannot intend such an iniquitous will as this to stand !"

"No, no, burn it ; I intended to destroy it if I could; put it into the fire behind you." With the greatest amount of pleasure he had ever in his life experienced, Lance obeyed her. He thrust the document into the hottest corner of the wood fire behind him and held it there with the poker until it was consumed into tinder. The old woman seemed to grow calmer and more composed when that was done.

"Now," she said, "come here and I will show you this other. I have written it myself at odd moments, when he—Wilson—was out. I've had to be very careful. Is this legal do you think? Read it and tell me."

Lance came close to her chair and took the other folded sheet of foolscap paper, which she drew cautiously out of its envelope from her hand.

"Read it quickly," she whispered, with a nervous look over her shoulder towards the door ; and Lance read :

"This is the last will of me, Margaretta Sarah Durham, of Fairmead Hall, Fairley, in the county of Oxford. I devise and bequeath all my estate and effects real and personal, of which I may die possessed of or entitled to, to my great niece Margaret absolutely, and I revoke all former wills and codicils.

"Dated 2nd day of December, 1889."

"Is that correct, Mr. Parker? Will that be acted upon if I sign it?" she asked anxiously.

"It is perfectly correct, Miss Durham," replied Lance.

"Very well. Ring the bell three times and the housemaid will come, and you and she shall witness it."

Lance unlocked the door and rang the bell as desired. In a few minutes Jane Green, the maid who had gone to Fairley Junction with Madge, and who was still devoted to her young mistress and wretchedly unhappy at her disappearance, entered timidly. Miss Durham in a few brief words explained the business on hand to her, and gave her a crisp five-pound note to help her, she said, to hold her tongue. Then old Miss Durham signed her name to her new will, and Lance and Jane wrote their names below hers. Lance breathed more freely when this was safely accomplished.

"Now give your card to Jane Green, Mr. Parker, and write on it some address which will find you in London. Jane, when I die you are to telegraph at once to this gentleman to that address, remember."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Now you may go."

When the girl had left the room, the old woman sank back exhausted into her chair.

"Take it to London with you and keep it till you hear of my death—it won't be long now, it won't be long! And it would not be safe here—that man would suspect me and find it. And now good-bye. Go and find Madge, and tell her that her old aunt repented and made amends to her before she died, for all the evil which she had brought upon her during her life."

CHAPTER XXXV.

MEMORIES AND REGRETS.

"The heart that has truly loved never forgets,
But as truly loves on to the close!"

—MOORE.

MADGE had become hopeless. She began to resign herself to what she believed to be the will of God. It was evident that she would never now recover her child.

Mrs. Waterson often endeavoured to console her by assuring her that without a doubt the boy must have

fallen into good hands and be well cared for. But Madge believed otherwise—she believed him to be dead.

One night she had so vivid and so wonderful a dream, that she was convinced ever after that it was not a dream at all—but a vision.

It seemed to her that Johnny was standing at the foot of her bed, clad in his little white night-shirt with his bare pink toes upon the carpet and his little hands held out to her. There was a smile upon his face and he looked well and happy.

She raised herself up in bed and looked at him. She did not dare to speak, she scarcely ventured to breathe, lest this dear and wonderful sight should be lost to her. Then she heard his voice—those childish accents she knew so well and which had often and often rung in her ears, bringing to her a cruel realization of her loss, now sounded distinctly and clearly through the half-lighted room.

“Muzzer,” the voice of little Johnny seemed to say to her.
“Muzzer, don’t c’y any more—Johnny vezy happy.”

And then all was over—the dream or vision, whichever it was, had vanished—and although she could never remember waking up, she knew immediately afterwards that she was awake—sobbing upon her pillow.

After that, curiously enough, Madge grew more tranquil. She ceased to fret. She believed that her boy was in Heaven, and that he had been miraculously allowed to come down and visit her in order to tell her so.

She was comforted. She settled down more thoroughly to her daily life, a little colour and roundness came back into her thin pale cheeks, a little more life and animation to her step and manner. She began to take an interest in her work, and to experience a satisfaction in earning her own living. She improved rapidly in the business, and her weekly salary was raised. She also became deeply attached to Mrs. Waterson, whilst Constance in her turn realized that she had won to her service a faithful heart, who would work for her with untiring devotion and serve her with an almost over-scrupulous sense of honesty.

Whenever there was any commission of trust and of importance to be done, it was to Miss Durham that Mrs. Waterson invariably confided it.

Constance found, too, that the pretty ladylike girl was popular with her customers, and once Miss Verinder on her way out of the show-room had said to her:

“When you have occasion to send anything to Hill Street, Mrs. Waterson, I wish you would send it by the same young lady who came before?”

“Miss Durham, you mean?”

“Yes—she is pretty and graceful. I have taken a fancy to her. She looks as if she had had a history?”

But Mrs. Waterson was too wide-awake a woman of the world to gossip about anybody's past—she only said with a smile to her wealthy customer:

"I am glad you like her. I will certainly send her to you in future. You may trust her taste, it is excellent."

Oddly enough, about the time that Madge definitely laid aside for ever all hopes of seeing her child again in this world, there began to arise in her heart certain memories and longings which she had fondly thought had been laid to rest long ago within her.

She began to think often and much of her lost lover. She did not know why the thought of him awoke within her at this period of her life ; perhaps it was because Madge was one of those loveable women who are incapable of enduring existence without something and someone to idolize and to worship. As long as she had her boy this great need of her heart was filled up—she could endure the loss of the father because of the treasure she had found in the child. But now that her child had been taken from her, it seemed as though the image of her lover returned to her with all its early fascination.

She often caught herself pondering long and earnestly over the past. She read and re-read his cruel letter of farewell, trying to find in it some hidden meaning, some palliation or excuse for his heartlessness and subsequent desertion of her. Often she recalled to mind how her dear Aunt Margaret had firmly believed that some terrible mistake or misunderstanding underlay the strange and inscrutable mystery of Jack's departure ; how she had repeatedly assured her that she did not believe the marriage had been an illegal one, and had urged her to take steps to find him.

Perhaps after all Aunt Margaret, who had been wise at the same time that she had been foolish—with that mixture of wisdom and foolishness which is sometimes mingled together in those whose hearts are gold and whose heads are ignorant of the world—perhaps that dear Aunt Margaret had been right ! Now that she was dead, Madge was more inclined to believe in her than when she had been alive—and if she had been right—then was she not Jack's wife after all ? And the thought sent a strange thrill of pride and delight through her heart.

He might have deserted her, forgotten her, been untrue to her even, but supposing she were his wife still, after all, and through it all—then would it not happen that in some future life, if not in this one, they might come together and be happy again at the last ?

So persistently did her thoughts run in this groove that she began to dream of all sorts of wild and impossible chances. As she sat bending industriously over her work her mind

would be busy with these wild hopes. As she walked to and fro along the streets her whole soul would be wrapped up in a reverie in which a re-union with the man she still loved so dearly, hung like a fantastic mirage delusively before her eyes.

Once, when Mrs. Waterson had sent her out in the afternoon to match some trimming at a shop in Bond Street, her heart beat wildly and a sudden faintness almost overcame her, at the sight of a gentleman walking on the opposite side of the street.

There was something in his gait and the straight cut of his tall, well-built figure which reminded her of Jack! She hurried on—he was walking very fast, but still she managed to come up with him, then in a moment she saw that she had made a mistake. His hair was much fairer and the glimpse of his side face which she caught sight of was different, it was only a stranger!

She fell back sick and weary, and disappointed, and then after a little she began to put some searching questions to herself. What, supposing it had indeed been Jack, what would she have done?

Would she have thrown herself upon his mercy and entreated him to take her back and love her once more? Could she have blotted out the past years of neglect and forgetfulness and have forgiven him and prayed him for his kindness again as though his cruelty were nothing to her and nothing had stood between them? She could not tell. She hoped not, because she tried to recollect that she was a Miss Durham of Fairmead, and that she ought in consequence to remember her pride and her dignity, but at her heart of hearts, she secretly feared that if it actually came to such a point with her, nature would cry out and drown the decorous voices of education and training, and Love would triumph over Pride!

And this latter reflection filled her with shame as well as with sadness!

Late one afternoon, Mrs. Waterson said to her :

“ There are those French hats just come from the maker’s, Miss Durham, I wish you would take them round to Hill Street and ask Miss Verinder to choose which she will have. There are three grey felt ones of different shapes to go with her grey travelling dress, and two ruby-coloured to match the ruby walking-gown. You must get her to select her shapes and to tell you how she will like them trimmed. You can take some wings and feather trimmings with you and give her your advice.”

It was already dark on the short winter afternoon, and Madge put on her hat and jacket and went out into the foggy streets, where the lamps were just being lighted, with the bandbox upon her arm.

At this very moment Jack Ludlow was letting himself into the front door at Hill Street with his latch-key.

He had not seen Agnes since their stormy interview of the previous evening. She was never an early riser, and at ten o'clock she had not left her bedroom. Jack having finished his breakfast, had gone out somewhat more hastily perhaps than he would have done, had he not been in momentary fear of fresh encounters and fresh scenes with the lady of his affections. He scarcely, indeed, waited to see his mother, but pleading "business in the City" went hastily out of the house.

He had no business, either in the City or elsewhere. He went down to his Club and read the papers, sauntered aimlessly about the streets and called upon his uncle only to find that he had gone out. He could settle to nothing, he felt restless and unhappy. The discovery that he had made last night haunted him, the thought of those letters going wrong so long ago, and with such disastrous consequences, consequences which it was now too late to alter or to remedy, burnt like a fever in his brain and maddened him.

Too late he realized that he had committed a terrible error, too late he saw that but for his own mistaken reticence, the whole of his life might have been altered. Yes, he had been a coward in the old days, a coward not to have gone openly and boldly to his uncle and confessed a love in which there was no disgrace and trusted to his own perseverance to win his consent to his marriage with the girl whose heart he had won. Now, apparently, even Lord Castlemere regretted his present choice, and would have been glad enough to have welcomed such a one as Madge into his family—it was the irony of fate!

When he thought over that letter, too, he could not but see that Lord Castlemere, who had high-minded and rigid ideas concerning moral purity, might very possibly come to misinterpret its meaning in the same manner that Agnes had done, and that no after efforts of his own to disclose the real circumstances and explain away the suspicious appearances would suffice to efface the painful impression certain to be made upon the minds both of his uncle and his mother should they ever come to see it.

He loved them both, he did not desire to give them pain, or to arouse their distrust toward himself, and he very distinctly therefore did not wish them to see that unfortunate letter.

Yet neither, on the other hand, did he intend to buy Agnes's silence by agreeing to her wishes concerning the pearl necklace.

For the sake of his own dignity and self-respect, no less than for the sake of his inherent repugnance to become her advocate in such a cause, he was quite determined that he would make no effort to persuade his uncle to lend it to her.

He was still most miserable, and much tossed about with doubts and uncertainties, when he came back to Hill Street late in the afternoon.

He was told by the butler that Lady Mary and Miss Verinder had not yet returned from their drive, he was glad of it. He turned into a pleasant book-lined room on the ground floor known as the library, where a lamp had been lit, and he told the man to bring him some tea.

He flung himself into a chair by the fire, and took up a magazine that lay upon the table. He had not sat there many moments when the door opened softly behind him. Believing it to be the servant with the tea, he did not look up or turn round ; he was therefore considerably surprised when he felt a small, soft hand laid gently upon his knee, and looking up beheld a little serious-faced boy standing by his chair staring at him fixedly.

Now there was something about the aspect of this little child which caused Jack to return his gaze with an earnestness equal to his own.

Of course he knew in a moment that it must be his mother's waif, and yet, that was not at all what made him look at him so attentively.

This morsel of humanity, this mite three foot high, whose little fist lay upon his knee, and whose bright brown eyes looked up so solemnly into his face, was, oh, marvel of marvels, the very living image of himself !

The likeness which had struck his mother at first, but to which she had now grown accustomed, struck Jack too, with a strange and curious sense of bewilderment.

Had his mother noticed it ? Would his uncle see it as he did ? And then, all at once, the letter and the horrible interpretation which might be put upon it, the child, the likeness, all seemed to come upon him like an evil nightmare, and for a moment he asked himself if he was awake or dreaming--if he was sane or if he was mad !

Who was this child who was so like himself ? Where did he come from ? Why was this wonderful imitation of his own features staring motionless into his face ?

All at once the atom at his knee smiled.

The smile was sunshine itself.

"Oo funny man," said Johnny with deliberation and with distinct approbation in his aspect.

"Johnny like 'oo," and without more ado the baby clambered up on to his lap, put his arms round his neck, and pressed his rosebud lips closely and lovingly upon Jack's cheek.

And then a strange thing happened. Jack, who knew nothing about children--to whom a child was a mysterious unknown creature best seen at a distance and not desirable to meddle with--Jack suddenly felt at his heart-strings the

queerest and most unaccountable glow of pleasure and of happiness—he felt—this matter-of-fact young Englishman—he felt that he could *love* this unknown child! He held him tightly to his heart, returning his baby kisses with a strength and fervour at which some children would have been frightened, but which did not terrify Johnny in the least, for that young man proceeded without more ado to clench Jack's nose firmly in his fist and to cry exultingly as he kicked his chubby legs about :

“ Nice man, kind man—Johnny loves 'oo ! ”

Then all at once there was a commotion outside and a sound of feminine voices in the hall. The ladies had come in from their drive. Jack tried to put Johnny down, feeling shamefacedly guilty of unaccustomed sentimentality with regard to him, but Johnny clung on with all his might and refused to be put down. So with the child still grasping his neck, Jack stood up—just as the door opened and his Agnes in rich sable furs and satin draperies darkened the doorway.

“ Brought the hats from Mrs. Waterson's, has she? ” she was saying to the servant who opened the door for her. “ Show her in here, I will see her before I go upstairs.”

“ Not in here Agnes, surely! ” cried Jack, “ you are not going to see your milliner *here*? ”

“ Well, and why not, pray? ” cried Miss Verinder, looking at him defiantly—“ I am going to see her first, and then I want to speak to you. Good Gracious! ” she added with disgust, “ what on earth are you hugging that horrible brat for? I hate the sight of that child! ”

At this Johnny clung harder to him, and his baby face began to wrinkle itself into ominous puckers. There was evidently no love lost between the two.

“ Look at him now, ” continued Agnes. “ Of course he is going to howl! I never knew such a horrid child! ”

“ I think you might speak more kindly to the poor little mite, ” said Jack with indignation, “ especially as my mother is so fond of him, ” and then he walked away to the other end of the room, with the boy in his arms.

The room was long and narrow, and at the further end of it there was a kind of recess, beyond which again opened a small conservatory filled with palms and winter shrubs.

Jack stood with his back to the room talking in low tones to the boy and trying to pacify his little wounded heart by telling him stories about the plants.

Johnny, perched on his shoulder, leant his chin confidingly against his new friend's head, and was soon quite happy again.

“ Show the young person in here at once, ” called out Agnes to the butler.

The door opened and the “ young person ” came in.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

TOGETHER AT LAST.

“I had a dream, which was not all a dream.”

—BYRON.

WHILST Lance Parker was hurrying back to London as fast as an express train could carry him, with old Miss Durham's will in his coat pocket and the great news concerning Madge in his heart—he came, by the way, to a very wise and rational conclusion. He determined to go on his arrival straight to Lord Castlemere's rooms. He felt that he was not equal in his own person, and by his own authority to the upsetting of the arrangements of an entire family, unless the head of that family were primarily enlisted in the cause he was compelled to plead. On his arrival in town therefore he drove in the first place to Lincoln's Inn Fields, where he deposited Miss Durham's will in the hands of his own solicitor, afterwards he set out for Bury Street, where he failed to find his man, but ran him to ground at last in the reading-room of the Conservative Club.

The mission on which he had come was a delicate one, and Lance felt decidedly nervous as he proceeded to unfold his story—but Lord Castlemere had always been friendly to him, and as he continued to explain the history of Jack's early romance—to express his own conviction that he had been actually married—and to disclose his recent discovery that Madge was in all human probability still alive—he was rejoiced to see that Lord Castlemere became deeply interested and even greatly excited, but that he was not in the very least angry or disbelieving.

“And this girl—whom you believe him to have married,” he asked when the narrative was at an end, “she is a lady you say?”

“Absolutely and thoroughly, my lord, and one of the most sweet and charming girls you can imagine. She coines of a good country family. The Durhams have owned Fairmead Hall for several generations, and as I tell you, Miss Durham, an old lady of over eighty, has just confided to my care a new will, which I witnessed, leaving her very handsome property entirely to her niece, whom she believes to be still alive. You must see, that of course Jack's marriage to Miss Verinder must at any rate be postponed until we can learn some definite tidings of her.”

“If it were to be postponed altogether it would be a matter of rejoicing to me, Parker,” cried Lord Castlemere with

energy, "for I do not mind telling you that I have heard the most unsatisfactory rumours concerning Miss Verinder. I have this afternoon seen an old friend of mine—the Duchess of St. Graile—and I have with some trouble extracted from her that Miss Verinder for the last two seasons has made herself exceedingly conspicuous with a certain Major Lawley—to whom everybody believed her to be engaged—in fact it appears that she only gave this gentleman his final congé quite lately, after Jack's return to England; so that she never can have had any real affection for my poor boy. Any good girl who loved him, would please me better than she does now."

"Believe me, Lord Castlemere, Miss Durham—or rather Mrs. Ludlow, as I believe I ought to call her—is far more worthy of Jack than Miss Verinder."

"You are *sure* that he married her? you—do not think that—that—"

"I can think nothing but what is right of both of them, my lord," cried Lance somewhat hotly. "If you had seen *her*, you would know that to doubt her goodness is impossible! And besides there is a child—a boy—that is proof enough to my mind."

"A child!" repeated the old man softly with a long in-drawn breath indicative of profound emotion. "A boy too—an heir! the thing of all others I have longed for most! Oh, why in the name of fortune did not Jack tell me of this marriage long ago? I would have forgiven him—why did he not confide in me?"

"Ah! why indeed? for no reason that I can see, save that it is not in Jack's nature to make confidences, and then you see he knew nothing of the child's existence, the old woman wrote and told him his wife was dead, and he was away abroad at the time, and could do nothing, and so I suppose—upon the principle of 'least said, soonest mended,' he thought that he would bury the whole episode for ever and keep his secret to his life's end. And now, Lord Castlemere, having told you all, and laid the whole case in your hands—what steps are you going to take to find out whether she still lives? for, recollect, she may even now have perished of want and neglect. You have money, and you have influence."

"And they shall both be used to their uttermost, never fear, Parker! I will leave no stone unturned; but the first thing we have got to do, you and I, is to go and tell all this to Lady Mary. She will have come in from her drive by this hour, we shall find her at home, she is about the wisest woman I know, as well as the best, and she will understand exactly what are the first steps we must take to set right this veritable chapter of errors."

He rose from his chair, called for his hat and coat, and they started together for Hill Street in a hansom.

* * * * *

When the young lady from Mrs. Waterson's came into the library at Hill Street at Miss Verinder's bidding, she found that lady standing by the table in front of the fire awaiting her. There was a duplex lamp on the table, but it was covered by a large, dark-red silk shade, so that the rest of the room was shrouded in gloom. She deposited the bandbox on the table and busied herself with unfastening the strap.

Madge was quite composed and tranquil, but Agnes was almost speechless with excitement; she was about to accomplish her evil purpose, and by bringing Jack face to face with this love of his youth, to confound and put him to utter confusion! They were in the same room together now—in another moment Jack would become aware of her identity! and then—how would he after to-day dare to tell her again that the woman was dead?—how would he be able to deny his guilty past, or to make excuses for his false and deceitful conduct? Her heart beat wildly in anticipation—already she seemed to see her triumph and his discomfiture, and the unutterable shame of the wretched woman who had been the victim of his guilt. Already she was gloating over his utter moral annihilation!

The letter too was in the bosom of her dress—she would fling it down between them so that both of them should see that to deceive and hoodwink her as to their past relations was impossible. After this, would Jack ever dare again to take that high and superior tone with her which exasperated her so much? if he heard stories of her past flirtation with Hugh Lawley, would he be able to cast it in her teeth? and above all, would he persist now in his refusal to help her to get hold of the pearl necklace?

All these reflections excited her so much that she was scarcely mistress of herself. Leaning upon the table with both hands, her breath coming short and hard, she gazed defiantly and menacingly at her rival, but said not a word.

Vaguely surprised by the lady's continued silence, Madge lifted her innocent blue eyes, and she experienced a little shock of dismay and uneasiness at the unexpected malignity of the flaming eyes that encountered her own. What ailed the beautiful Miss Verinder to-day? she wondered. Why did she look at her so strangely, so angrily?

Then, not being able to understand it, Madge lowered her eyes, and lifted the hats one by one out of the box.

"Mrs. Waterson said I was to ask you to select which shapes you wish to have," she said quietly. "These are for the grey dress, and those for the ruby——"

The decisive moment had come—*how* decisive, Agnes did not as yet fully know !

“ Jack ! ” she called aloud, looking round towards the back room. “ Jack, come here ! I want you to give me your opinion.”

At the self-same moment little Johnny, who, hoisted on his new friend’s arm, had been looking back into the room over his shoulder, began to struggle and kick in the most unaccountable manner. He became suddenly like a captured rabbit that fights to get free, his whole body writhing and wriggling, and twisting itself downwards out of his captor’s arms.

“ Let me go ! ” he cried breathlessly. “ Let me go to my muzzer ! I want to go to my muzzer ! ”

Madge lifted her startled eyes. Out of the gloom of the further end of the long room, into the nearer radiance of the circle of rosy light, there emerged suddenly a small flying object, the stumping sound of little flat soles, two chubby fists stretched out, a tiny face dimpled with baby laughter, and a lisping voice that shouted loudly : “ Muzzer, muzzer, muzzer ! ”

Down went the Paris hats, pell mell on to the carpet ! Madge uttered one wild cry, and darted forward, falling prone upon her knees before the advancing child, caught him madly to her heart, and burst into so strange a confusion of laughter and of tears, of cries of joy, and of incoherent sounds of love, covering his face, and neck, and arms the while with frantic kisses, such as no pen can depict, and no words are able rightly to describe !

It was the very delirium of joy !

Gazing in utter bewilderment from the opposite ends of the room, the two other persons most interested in this strange and lovely scene, stood for a moment speechless and spellbound.

The little group was half way between them both, the kneeling mother in her frantic joy, and the happy laughing child, clinging to one another in an ecstasy of love—they heard nothing, saw nothing, thought of nothing—save only of each other.

All at once into that paradise of maternal joy there entered something else. A heavy footstep strode down the room. Upon Madge’s bowed head, as she devoured her child’s soft neck with kisses, a hand was suddenly laid, and a man’s deep voice awoke her from her trance of happiness.

“ *Madge—my God ! Madge ! is it you ?* ”

She lifted her head—he stood above her—she was kneeling literally at his feet—the body of the child between them ; her face was no longer pale and sad, but flushed with a brilliant carmine, and radiant with life ; and in her heaven-blue

eyes there flashed the tender beauty of her divine mother love. Once more she was the Madge of his youth—the sweet girl wife he had loved and lost !

“Jack !” she murmured wonderingly, in an awestruck whisper, recoiling a little from him as she knelt. For at that moment she scarcely knew whether he were alive or dead—whether what she saw was real, or only some vision of another world that would presently vanish away in nothingness from her sight.

“Jack, have you come back to me ?”

Then he lifted her from the ground, and clasped her in his arms, holding her tightly to his heart, and covering her lips with passionate kisses.

“Come back ? Yes, I have come back for ever, my child, my darling, my love ! Never, never to part from you again.”

And the little child, capering beside them, clung, laughing with delight, to their hands.

In that moment, they remembered nothing ; the unfathomable mystery that had divided them, the still more wonderful mystery that had brought them together, the years of pain and absence which lay behind them—they had forgotten them all !

And they had also forgotten Miss Agnes Verinder.

It was her voice of rage and indignation which caused them at last to spring guiltily asunder.

“Jack, how dare you kiss that woman in my presence ? How dare you insult me by owning your shameful connection with her ? And you, you bold-faced and brazen girl, go back to your shop——”

She never finished her sentence.

“Hold your tongue, Agnes !” cried Jack, and took Madge’s arm within his own, as he strode forward towards her. “You do not know what you are saying—this lady is my wife.”

“Your—what ! *your wife* ?” gasped Agnes, falling back. She turned pale as death ; then, after a second, added with inexpressible contempt : “It is false—I do not believe you. It is a lie.”

“Whether you believe it or not does not matter much, since it happens to be the truth. I married this lady, four and a half years ago, and I was led to believe that she had died in my absence abroad, a few months after our marriage—that must be my excuse for the grievous wrong I have unwittingly done you, Agnes, in asking you to be my wife. I believed myself to be a free man—until five minutes ago I believed it. How this miracle has come to pass, and she is still alive and here in this house, I have yet to learn,” he added, turning with a fond smile towards Madge. “No doubt soon we shall understand it all, although at present I confess I am somewhat bewildered ! Meanwhile, Agnes, I

entreat you to forgive me for being the cause of much distress and disappointment to you ; I hope and believe it is nothing worse. Let us, at any rate, say good-bye to one another in peace—and let us at least be thankful that, owing to this opportune return to life of the wife I believed to be dead, I have been mercifully spared from unwittingly bringing upon you, a yet far more cruel and irredeemable injury."

His words were kind and moderate in tone—he felt for her acutely—and not knowing how she had plotted to humiliate him, he was painfully conscious of the distress which she must be now enduring.

After all, what Agnes felt was perhaps scarcely distress. Rage, bitter and helpless, mortification to her vanity—a wild longing for vengeance upon the innocent woman who had supplanted her, and a strong disgust to find the tables turned in so extraordinary a manner upon herself. These were amongst the chief sensations she experienced ; but far above them all was the blank and hopeless disappointment of losing her future position and all the Castle Regis jewellery—the necklace included—and the misery and despair which overcame her at the thought of her beautiful but now utterly useless trousseau !

The remembrance of this made her feel absolutely murderous. She would not see Jack's outstretched hand ; only, scarcely knowing what she did, she flung down the old letter furiously upon the table, gathered her sable cloak about her, and, casting one glance of horrible rage and defiance at Madge, she left the room without another word.

Upstairs in the drawing-room, in total ignorance of the eventful things which were taking place below, Lord Castlemere and Lance were unfolding their strange story to Lady Mary's wondering ears—and, oddly enough, she also, experienced a sense of relief that her beautiful favourite, Agnes Verinder, could now perhaps never become her daughter-in-law.

Lord Castlemere, in a low voice, had confided his own doubts to her—and then Lady Mary admitted that she too had been disenchanted of late.

" You cannot think," she told him, " how heartlessly and hardly she behaved about that poor little boy whom I have adopted—there was something so unwomanly in the attitude she took up about him that I have never been able to forgive her or to like her as much since. It only shows how one may be deceived in a person's character ! "

" If we can only find this lost young lady——" said her brother-in-law.

" The first step, I think," said Lady Mary, " is to inform Jack of all that Mr. Parker has discovered, and to find out from him where he was married, so that we may be provided,

for the sake of form, with the registers of the marriage"—for Lady Mary, no more than Lance, ever doubted for one moment her son's rectitude of conduct towards Madge—"and upon myself will then fall the painful task of acquainting Agnes with our suspicions. It is, of course, hard upon her, but I cannot altogether regret it."

Then she got up and rang the bell.

"Where is Mr. Ludlow? Has he come in?" she asked of the footman.

"He is in the library, my lady."

"And Miss Verinder?"

"Miss Verinder is in her room, she has just rung for her maid, my lady, to help her to pack up," added the man, who, in common with the rest of the household, had become aware of the fact that something extraordinary and out of the common was going on amongst his betters.

"To pack up!" repeated Lady Mary. And then the three conspirators looked at one another in blank amazement.

"And is Mr. Ludlow alone in the library?" continued Lady Mary, trying to appear unconcerned.

Thomas coughed slightly behind his hand, and looked away. After a moment he said with some hesitation :

"Hickman—" this was the butler—"Hickman told me just now that there is a young lady in the library with Mr. Ludlow—the young lady as comes here sometimes from the dressmaker's."

At this startling announcement Lady Mary coloured very much, and Lord Castlemere said with decision :

"I think we had better go down and find Jack in the library, my dear. Will you come too, Parker?" He offered his arm to his sister-in-law with old-fashioned gallantry, and so they all three went downstairs.

And when Lady Mary softly opened the door—lo, and behold! there was displayed to them a wonderful scene, of which they were all three the unseen spectators.

On a low arm-chair by the fire sat Jack, holding upon his knee a slender and graceful young woman; his arms were round her waist, her soft rosy cheek rested against his forehead, and with one hand she stroked the back of his head caressingly, whilst with the other she fondly supported the small person of master Johnny, who, perched between his parents on the arm of the chair, was balancing himself in that precarious position with some difficulty. On Madge's knee lay the open letter which had explained for itself the whole history of the blunders of the past.

Suddenly into the midst of this charming picture of domestic happiness, there rushed wildly the excited and unromantic form of Lancelot Parker. Our friend Lance had no pretty speeches of congratulatory import at his command,

he stood there gasping and puffing and ejaculating ; wringing first Madge's hands and then Jack's, in an ecstasy of delight and with an ardour and energy which caused his friends some physical discomfort ; whilst tears which did not I think discredit his manhood, glittered very visibly in his unlovely but honest eyes.

Then spake Jack to the two who stood behind him :

“ Dearest Mother ! My dear Uncle ! How am I to tell you the wonderful thing that has happened ? I do not know how to speak—only—only—this is my dear wife whom I secretly married years ago, and whom I have long believed to be dead—and this boy—whom my mother in her goodness and loving charity has befriended and adopted—is her own grandchild and my son—and your heir, Lord Castlemere ! ”

And then with a little gush of fatherly pride, which sat oddly, yet somewhat touchingly, upon him, Jack picked up the boy and placed him in Lord Castlemere's arms.

Master Johnny with much self-possession, laughed aloud and tugged delightedly at his great uncle's grey whiskers ; he evidently considered the whole performance a very great piece of fun !

Lady Mary tearfully clasped her son and his wife in turn to her heart.

When they were all composed enough to speak, Lord Castlemere cleared his throat and said :

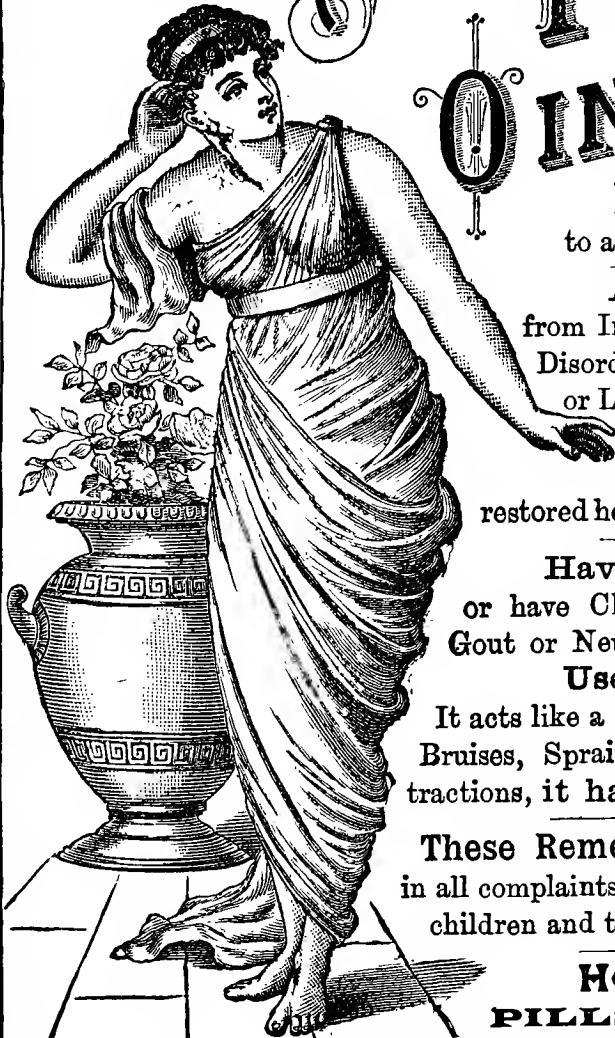
“ A very jolly little chap—very like you, Jack, and very like your dear mother. He does you great credit, Mrs. Ludlow,” and then, turning to Jack, he added, “ But why on earth, my dear boy, you took the trouble to conceal your marriage with this charming young lady from all your friends and relations—and so to place us all upon the brink of a horrible family tragedy by your silence—I really cannot possibly imagine ! ”

“ Nor I either, Uncle ! ” answered Jack, with a happy laugh. “ All I have to say in excuse for myself is, that if we were all as wise before, as we are after the event—if we all knew for certain what was going to happen to us in the future, and how our friends would regard the rash and impulsive actions of our lives, and if everybody were immediately to confess everything he had ever done, to everybody else—why then !—the world would contain no more romances, and lovers would never have any more secrets ! ”

THE END.

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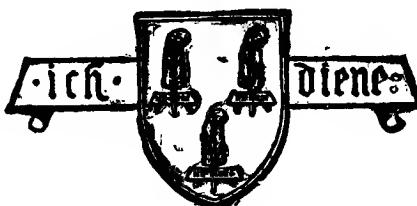
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DR. J. COLLIS BROWNE'S CHLORODYNE. — Vice Chairman Sir W. PAGE WOOD stated publicly in Court that Dr. J. COLLIS BROWNE was UNDOUBTLY THE INVENTOR of CHLORODYNE, that the whole story of the defendant Freeman was deliberately untrue, and he regretted to say it had been sworn to. — See *The Times*, July 13th, 1864.

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